

Satire as Journalism:
The Daily Show and American Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Under the Executive Committee
Of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2011

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ABSTRACT

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Notions of community and civic participation, and the role journalism plays in establishing, reinforcing or disrupting them, have been part of American life since the early days of the republic. Equally American, and closely connected with them, are the ideas that our public institutions and elected officials are appropriate targets for both journalistic scrutiny and comedic satire. Press and speech protections that James Madison and Thomas Jefferson wrote into the Constitution have served journalists and satirists – and those who work both camps, such as Ben Franklin, Mark Twain and H.L. Mencken - during critical times in our history. Indeed, the blurring of lines between news and entertainment, public policy and popular culture, is not a new phenomenon.

Yet, recent concerns that journalism is being subsumed within the larger field of mass communication and competing with an increasingly diverse group of narratives that includes political satire are well-founded. Changes in media technology and acute economic uncertainty have hit traditional news outlets at a time when Americans clearly want a voice they can trust to challenge institutions they believe are failing them. And during the first decade of the twenty-first century, none has filled that role as uniquely as Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show* on the Comedy Central Network. When *Time*

recently asked readers to identify “the most trusted newsperson in America,” Stewart was the runaway winner. That matched an earlier survey by the Pew Center in which Stewart tied Brian Williams, Tom Browkaw, Dan Rather and Anderson Cooper as the journalist respondents most admire.

Scholarly work on Stewart typically builds on surveys that show young adults get political information from his show (Pew, ANES). It also challenges his frequent claim that he is nothing more than a stand-up comedian peddling satire, and it argues that his shtick, which he calls “fake news,” is actually a quasi-journalistic product. This study moves beyond those issues by reviving questions about the role news media play in creating community. It applies research through the method of the interpretive turn pioneered by James Carey, and challenges the notion that Stewart’s viewers are no more than fans who tune in to him as isolated individuals seeking entertainment. It argues that they seek him out because the para-political talk he offers helps them connect with a larger community of like-minded fellows. It draws on Mills’ distinctions between mass media and public media, and it uses Freud’s interpretation of jokes as a vehicle to address ruptured relationships and wish-fulfillment to examine the demand for a public conversation lacking in the news offered by aloof network anchors who became the faces of broadcast journalism during the latter part of the twentieth century. Finally, it considers the broader implications this nexus between media satire and news reporting – and the communities that are building around it – has for journalism and its traditional role in our participatory democracy.

Research for this study, especially ideas and perceptions about how mainstream media work, is grounded in my own professional experience of fifteen years as a daily

newspaper reporter, political writer and press secretary in three major political campaigns. Ideas and observations about stand-up comedy come from a year-long ethnography of The Comedy Cellar, a stand-up club in Greenwich Village known for political humor, from numerous visits to tapings of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *Tough Crowd*, and from interviews with a number of stand-up comedians (apart from the ethnographic work) and writers for those shows. Ideas about the interplay between traditional journalism and so-called “fake news,” the narrative offered by Stewart and others, come from interviews with roughly a half-dozen nationally recognized journalists who reported on the 2004 presidential campaign. A significant amount of archival research in the popular press – specifically newspapers and news magazines – was necessary because it is a large repository for background into Stewart’s professional life and training, and that is essential context for a specific dialogue about the changing landscape of American journalism. Finally, impressions and findings about Stewart’s audience and the Americans who are increasingly turning to satire as a vehicle for information to locate themselves in our participatory democracy came largely from observations and interviews conducted in Washington D.C. for four days before, during and after the Rally to Restore Sanity.

Early scholarship on the increasingly complex relationship between satire and traditional journalism has focused on the satirists and attempted to define their narratives as something more than comedy – some type of popular journalistic hybrid or emerging narrative that is a new form of journalism. This study acknowledges that debate but moves beyond it. In fact, it is grounded in the idea that although the television shows are new, there is nothing new about satirists using the media of their

day to challenge powerful institutions, including public office holders. Instead, it approaches the rise of these satirists by asking what is happening in America that is causing citizens to turn away from traditional sources of news and information in favor of the narratives they offer. It examines the likelihood that the popular demand for Stewart's narrative signals a larger shift in the way Americans think about news and where they go to get it – away from institutional journalism and its longstanding ethos of objectivity and the authoritative voice and toward more independent voices that essentially return to iconic ideas of the press as a tool for building community and enabling conversations between publics rather than acting as the mass medium it did in the latter part of the twentieth century.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is dedicated to my late friend Molly Ivins, whom I admired from a distance during my early years as journalist and who later became a great colleague and dear friend at the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. Molly showed a lot of us that just because politics is serious doesn't mean it can't be funny. The deep personal friendship we shared over the years through great changes in both our lives proved the shallowness of the old saying "Don't ever meet your heroes." Thanks for everything, sweet pea.

Todd Gitlin redefines brilliant, and that amazing intellect is buoyed by a lion's heart and a philosopher's soul. Gitlin taught me the intellectual craft of seeing the world through a sociologist's eyes. He was patient with missteps that sprung from my journalistic training, which isn't always the best fit for a sociological paradigm, and he constantly amazed me with his curiosity about life, politics and the world. Along the way, he went from Prof. Gitlin to Todd, a lifelong friend and true mentor. What a mensch.

Andie Tucher and James Carey opened the door for my life's second act: the chance to come to Columbia and learn to be a scholar. Andie put up with my grouchiness and was in my corner with her masterful editing for nearly a decade to pull me over the finish line. Carey was the reason I came to the J School. His passing was an immeasurable loss, except that it left me constantly asking, "What would Carey think about all this?" Fittingly, that question remains at the forefront of my scholarly work. To be one of his protégés instills a gratitude and humility that is hard to describe.

My unlikely friendship with Herb Gans was the oddest surprise to come from my time at Columbia. I cherish it deeply. Gans supervised my initial study of comedy, a year-long project that involved going twice a week to The Comedy Cellar, a stand-up comedy club in Greenwich Village. His critique of my field notes was an amazing window into the mind of a great scholar and social critic. His door and his inbox stayed open years after I finished our official work. He is an academic purist, and that is fine with me.

Although I'm a communications scholar, my focus is American politics, and I always want a political scientist in my academic circle. Bob Shapiro was kind enough to do those honors at Columbia. He made sure I was well versed in the literature of public opinion including and separate and apart from survey research. He introduced me to Brigitte Nacos and Kathleen Knight, who gave me opportunities to teach outside the journalism school and who later served on my dissertation committee. Shapiro's intellect and wit are transcendent and classically New York: Woody Allen, you are no Bob Shapiro.

Reconnecting with my old friend Siva Vaidhyanathan was another surprise and great reward in this journey. Siva's reverence for the academy - for intellectual rigor and the contributions we make through research and discourse - is a constant inspiration. He has no idea how much he has mentored me simply by example and how encouraging it has been to watch him succeed at the level he has.

Jonnet Abeles is my guardian angel. She and Peter effectively adopted me when I desperately needed something socially and intellectually stimulating - an ersatz family

I could connect with - outside the Journalism School. Professionally and personally, no one does detail like Jonnet. Her warm heart and selfless soul are boundless.

The Columbia Graduate School of Journalism did what I had hoped: It changed my life. I took this journey for no reason other than I wanted to say I had given myself the best education possible. That happened for me at Columbia. Along the way, I became part of a community of the finest journalists and friends I could ever imagine.

I knew how to practice journalism when I came to Columbia, but I didn't know how to teach it. John Dinges and Laura Muha showed me how, and along the way extended themselves as friends as well as mentors. My special partner Rhoda Lipton took me under her wing and looked out for me in ways I couldn't see at the time. She's a tough ole bird who saw something special in a middle-aged Texan treading water in New York City and tossed him a line. Love you, Rho.

Julie Hartenstein did an amazing personal favor quietly for me at a very important moment, and if she hadn't I'm not sure I would have been able to finish what I started. Mitch Berger, Ari Goldman, LynNell Hanock, David Klatell, Joan Konner, Brooke Kroeger, Robert McDonald, Kathy Palagonia, Addie Rimmer, Michael Schudson, Rich Schapiro, Betsy West and Mary Lynn Young influenced and supported me in their own special ways. Like Maureen Stapleton, I actually should thank everybody I ever met in my entire life, because one thing I have learned on this intellectual journey is that we are the sum total of our experiences.

Finally, this wouldn't be complete without mentioning my great friend and loyal companion Bo The Wonderdog, who came to live with me my first year in this journey.

He stayed up with me when I needed to work through the night, and slept nearby when I was doing the reading and writing that are the heart of this project. Good job, Gremlin.

“...keep fightin’ for freedom and justice, beloveds, but don’t you forget to have fun doin’ it. Lord, let your laughter ring forth. Be outrageous, ridicule the fraidy-cats, rejoice in all the oddities that freedom can produce. And when you get through kickin’ ass and celebratin’ the sheer joy of a good fight, be sure to tell those who come after how much fun it was.”

- Molly Ivins “The Fun's in the Fight,"
Mother Jones, 1993

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It's hard to imagine now, but the truth is no one saw Jon Stewart coming. No one in the political establishment. No one in the mainstream media. And frankly, no one in the entertainment industry at the level he eventually would succeed.¹

Stewart sailed underneath the radar onto the national scene during the 2000 Florida recount, and by 2004 he'd changed the way American politics is crafted, reported and viewed by the politicians, the consultants and the reporters who cover them -- as well as by millions of Americans who for generations had counted on that cast to craft and distribute news about public affairs.

It's been an amazing ride for a guy who stumbled into a thirty-minute television show four nights a week on a marginal cable network. In less than a decade, he's racked up thirteen Emmys, two Peabodys, and a Grammy, published a best-selling book and been featured on the cover of *Time*. He's also been a focal point for national surveys

¹ Gerald Nachman also uses the phrase "no one saw him coming" for Mort Sahl in *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*. The parallels between Sahl and Stewart are striking. Sahl's conversational humor featured sharp social critique that pushed Americans to question the status quo at a time when his peers were perfecting double-entendre, slap stick and poking fun at their mothers-in-laws. He and Stewart arguably are the most important American comedians of the twentieth century, though in a 2004 interview with Larry King, Stewart dismissed the idea that he was influenced by Sahl's work.

that show Americans are increasingly turning to late-night comedy shows to get political information.

So, how could Stewart do all that with no political experience and no journalistic training?

American politics is largely performed by professionals, but what makes it really tick is the people's desire for a system that works. Politicians, their staffs, interest-group representatives and the journalists charged with reporting on them are supposed to represent citizens in a way that meets their need for orientation within our democracy. The day-to-day business of politics (committee meetings, procedural votes, non-binding resolutions, and debates over rule-making authority), aren't really that absorbing, and most Americans let that system proceed with little fanfare as long it satisfies their larger needs.

However, at various times and to varying degrees, the official political caste has failed to satisfy people's demands or address their concerns.² When that happens, citizens look for public representatives they believe are willing to say aloud what the professional political class can't or won't.

The dynamic works itself out in two ways.

Some citizens join a movement such as the Tea Party, which is the latest on a long list of ideologically and functionally diverse groups to grab the national spotlight. These groups emerge at different times with different intentions, and they have different

² The 1930s and mid1960-mid1970s often are cited as acute examples, but this phenomenon also occurs in different ways and to different degrees at times that are commonly perceived as less contentious. The 1950s, for example, are frequently dismissed as a placid time of social cohesion, but to many Americans the social fabric of that decade was characterized by intense repression and laced more with fear than fun.

impacts on our democratic discourse. They have leaders, but they are driven more by a membership with a common sense of purpose and function. Examples include the Grange, the Progressive Party, the John Birch Society, Students for a Democratic Society and the Reform Party.

Other citizens search for new characters or leaders and rally around them. These characters typically have an attractive vocabulary and present themselves in a way that invites disaffected persons to use them to connect to others who share their values and concerns. The prominence and relative strength of these figureheads (or jesters or demagogues) comes from their ability to articulate citizens' values and frustrations and by doing so convert those citizens into followers.

"Ditto Rush" as the followers of Rush Limbaugh, also known as "ditto heads," collectively say. It's also the mindset found in "Colbert Nation," the name Stephen Colbert has given viewers who follow him on *The Colbert Report*. The niches Limbaugh and Colbert occupy in current political discourse resemble the places filled in earlier times by a range of ideologically diverse cultural and political critics that includes: Father Charles Coughlin, Will Rogers, William F. Buckley, Mort Sahl and Dick Gregory.

These archetypical heroes, villains and fools – as with the movements mentioned earlier – are not derivative. Direct comparisons that limit them to images of each other merely in different years are overly simplistic and intellectually dangerous. Each offered a unique narrative shaped by the social, economic and political currents of his day.

What they do share is an astute use of mass communication, generally a specific medium or platform prevalent in their time. For Limbaugh and Colbert, it is the talk radio and cable television networks (initially called “new media”) that emerged during the 1990s. For Coughlin and Rogers, it was the radio broadcasts of the 1930s. Buckley astutely used the power of literary journalism, public television and newspaper syndicates. Sahl and Gregory were stand-up comedians who drew on the oral tradition of that narrative genre. Gregory parlayed success in that format into appearances on television variety hours and late-night talk shows popular in the 1960s and 1970s, and that visibility led to a best-selling autobiography. Sahl tied himself to the mass media with his trademark routine of coming on stage carrying a folded copy of *The New York Times* - - subtle homage to the idea Rogers made famous a generation earlier with his classic line: “All I know is what I read in the papers.”

Stewart embodies these traditions.

Before he took the reins of *The Daily Show* in 1999, Stewart was a struggling stand-up comedian with a shaky niche in a grueling profession. He had some random television appearances and a few second-tier comedy films to his credit, but his name was hardly a household word. Then, lightning struck in the form of the 2000 presidential campaign.

In a rare moment when extreme talent collided with golden opportunity and unforeseen events created a remarkable synergy, Stewart found his muse in a cross of media and political satire that quickly redefined a term from the old vernacular: “fake

news.”³ His revamped version of *The Daily Show* (formerly with Craig Kilborn) captured the attention and loyalty of a public that for more than a decade had been growing increasingly alienated from what was passing for political reporting: the irrelevant pablum offered by highly paid network correspondents and elite reporters for national newspapers and magazines who claimed “objectivity” as epistemology and delivered dubious findings with a feigned voice of God.

Acting in the archetypal traditions of “the trickster,” “the village idiot” and/or “the fool,” Stewart focused like a laser on absurdities in both national affairs and the way mainstream media reported them in a way that the anchors for the broadcast networks with billions of dollars of advertising revenue at stake would not.

Despite the relatively small audience cable television drew when Stewart arrived (compared to the four broadcast networks), *The Daily Show* emerged from the margins of political discourse - where satire traditionally thrives - and secured a place of relevance next to the traditional journalism it increasingly challenged. Since Stewart took the anchor’s chair, the show has steadily competed with mainstream media for legitimacy and often won.⁴

³ For much of the twentieth century, scholars used the term “fake news” to describe government and corporate sponsored pre-packaged news, often provided in the form of audio and video news releases to mainstream news outlets. The term came to more common use after David Lieberman wrote a cover article titled “Fake News” in a February 1992 edition of TV Guide. Lieberman took the media and PR industry to task over video news releases and argued that footage from them should be labeled so the audience was aware of its origin. If not, he argued, media who used the products risked undermining their own credibility for “(pretending) out of pride that what they broadcast is real news, instead of labeling it for what it is.”

⁴ In 2004, *The Daily Show* beat *Frontline*, *Nightline*, *60 Minutes* and *Meet the Press* to win best news and information program by the Television Critics Association. That same year, a Gallup poll showed media credibility at its lowest point in three decades. In 2009, an online poll by *Time* magazine named Stewart the most trusted news anchor the United States.

Stewart's satire, which is as much about the media as the politicians traditional media cover, exposed flaws in the omniscient voice and so-called "objective" epistemology of mainstream media. In doing so, it helped break the monopoly that political consultants and reporters who work for elite news organizations had on the narrative of presidential politics for most of the twentieth century. And that occurred at least partly because Stewart provided an intellectual and emotional gathering place for people who were looking for something more than they had been getting from the traditional national media core (the four broadcast networks, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News* and the *New York Times*).

The people who regularly tune into Stewart are not just watching another comedy program or news broadcast in the traditional sense of the word. They are connecting with like-minded fellows. They are laughing, no doubt, but more important, they are feeling their concerns and values mirrored in his narratives, and with the help of cable television joining together to witness someone not just telling jokes but engaging in journalism's most honorable tradition: speaking truth to power.

All of which makes Stewart and his work prime texts for critical study and scholarly examination.

* * *

The initial scholarly work on Stewart followed the effects tradition of social science survey research, content analysis and experiments. (See Ch. 1 for further discussion of the findings.)

A highly regarded biennial survey by the Pew Center for People and the Press during the 2004 presidential campaign found a spike in the number of young voters who claimed to get political news from comedians on late-night television, and both scholars and news organizations wanted to know how that might affect the ability of American voters to make informed decisions at the polls. Scholars followed with experiments to determine whether Stewart's style of political humor increased cynicism toward electoral politics and the media that cover them.

Industry groups, watching once reliable audiences abandon their products for news they could get on their own schedule with the Internet and in the 24-hour cable rotation, conducted content analyses that compared the scope of political information on Stewart's program with the line-up on network evening newscasts. They also commissioned studies to learn what Stewart was doing that might cause people to consider him a journalist - - and in some cases whether and how to incorporate his style and voice into their own products.

A subsequent round of scholarship moved into the qualitative tradition and located Stewart's work within the fields of political communication and culture studies. Jeffrey Jones, whose work began with Bill Maher and *Politically Incorrect*, coined the term "new political television" for a genre of programming he expanded to include *The Daily Show* and *Dennis Miller Live*. He argues that Stewart, Miller and Maher have challenged normative assumptions about who gets to speak about politics on television,

what issues will be covered and in what manner, and how audiences can engage politics on television beyond simply deferring to expert knowledge.⁵

Geoffrey Baym claims *The Daily Show* is part of an emerging media environment shaped by “technological multiplication, economic consolidation and discursive integration.” He argues that traditional news is increasingly hard to identify and define, and that *The Daily Show* is not “fake news” but an experiment in journalism that uses techniques drawn from the genres of news, comedy and television talk to revive a journalism of critical inquiry and advance a model of deliberative democracy.⁶

These studies offer a range of other ideas, but their chief critique is rooted in the narrative product Stewart and others create. Jones does touch on the audience aspect by reflecting on contemporary citizenship. He takes the position that politics is increasingly a textual practice for citizens, and he examines how these narratives are involved in the construction of political “meaning making”.⁷ In short, the widely circulated scholarship on this topic is largely a critique of the supply side.

This study is about demand.

My decision to study the interplay of comedy (and/or satire) and political reporting began in 2003 as I was considering the next step in my research into idea of

⁵ Jeffrey Jones, *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), x.

⁶ Geoffrey Baym, “*The Daily Show*: Discursive Integration an the Reinvention of Political Journalism,” *Political Communication*, Vol. 22, Issue 3 (July 2005) : 259-76.

⁷ Jones, 19.

how people get information about presidential politics: more specifically, what information they reject and what information they accept.⁸

The professional work I did for nearly fifteen years as a political reporter and as a campaign press secretary taught me some important lessons about the ways cultural frames and popular stereotypes shape – and at times create alternatives to – more dominant narratives that mainstream media offer as traditional journalism.

Reporters often select stories and frame them in ways they believe will resonate with readers. Effective press secretaries know they can't force something outrageous or unbelievable into the public conversation. They craft their "spin" so it taps into something a target audience is predisposed to believe, something that resonates with its values or perceptions of reality – to borrow from Walter Lippmann, "the pictures in their heads."

Comedy is at heart simply another form of communication. I first noticed that in 1996, when I was communications director for the Clinton-Gore/ Texas Democratic Party coordinated campaign. That year, the nightly barrage of quips Jay Leno and David Letterman made about Bob Dole's age and grumpy nature played right into our campaign message. That narrative didn't cost us anything from our advertising budget, but it was worth millions of dollars to us because it tapped into what the public was

⁸ This is the underlying theme of my academic research. It began with my master's thesis *Campaign 2000: Political Reporting in the Age of Cyberspace*. That study examined the emergence of journalism written exclusively for Internet websites, the first time such work had appeared during a presidential campaign cycle. It received a university distinction.

predisposed to believe: that Dole was locked into the past, and Clinton was “building a bridge to the twenty-first century.”⁹

We had to work hard and weren’t always totally successful when we tried to explain to reporters and the public that Dole’s fifteen percent across-the-board income tax cut was in our words “a risky tax scheme.” That’s because the popular stereotype is that Republicans are going to take care of working-class people when it came to cutting taxes. But when Dole mistakenly called the Los Angeles Dodgers the Brooklyn Dodgers and on a different occasion clumsily fell off the podium at a campaign appearance, it became part of the campaign meme – after Leno and Letterman pushed a narrative on late-night television that fit into the frame people already had of him as old, doddering and somewhat removed from current times.

It may not be fair or have to do with the traditional qualifications for being president, but this was my first inkling that audiences – the demanders – have more to say about the narratives that become salient in political campaigns than the politicians and media – the suppliers – often realize or want to acknowledge.¹⁰ That’s not to say presidential campaigns haven’t long considered storylines for themselves or their opponents based on what voters are predisposed to believe or marketed political candidates like consumer products, as Joe McGinniss showed in *The Selling of the*

⁹ In 1996, Dole was the object of 242 jokes, and Clinton was the object of 228 jokes by David Letterman, Jay Leno and Conan O’Brien, according to a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, which began monitoring politically oriented content of late-night monologues in 1989.

¹⁰ The 1828 presidential campaign was marked by overt charges that Andrew Jackson was an adulterer and his wife was a bigamist, which she was, though inadvertently, while Jackson’s supporters pushed rumors that John Q. Adams effectively was a pimp who had procured prostitutes for the czar when he served as ambassador to Russia.

President. Ronald Reagan's classic "morning in America" slogan was straight Madison Avenue audience outreach with no legislative agenda or political program tied to it.

The groundwork for this project began in 2002 with two research projects that led to papers presented for peer review at major academic conferences.

Pop Culture or Political Riff: Presidential Images and Narratives on Saturday Night Live was written in 2002 under the direction of Prof. Todd Gitlin. It draws on the results of an original content analysis of SNL skits that featured American presidents during the show's first twenty-five years (1977-2002). I used Walter Lippmann's work on stereotypes, and Erving Goffman and Gitlin's works on media frames to argue that popular television has created an audio-visual vocabulary of images, slogans and sound bites that for a quarter century has contributed to how Americans perceive presidential candidates - - and the images and words of this para-political conversation favors certain politicians and political ideas and disfavors others. It was presented in 2003 at Media in Transition 3 at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Going Around the Gatekeepers: Why Young Americans Get Political Information From Late-Night Television was written under the direction of Prof. Brigitte Nacos. It draws on the results of original focus groups of 18-to-26 year old American voters who were asked to discuss how they use mass media to stay politically informed. I place their responses in a context of Theodore Adorno's writing on "the culture industry" and Herb Gans sociology of "high culture/ low culture" and argue that political humor makes public figures into cultural entities. I used Lippmann's claim that

mass media facilitate pseudo-relationships between content and audience to show how that humor connects young viewers to politicians in the form of popular commodities. It was presented in 2003 at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association.

Also that year and into 2004, I conducted two simultaneous ethnographies.

One, under the direction of Gans, was a yearlong study of comedians, their jokes and professional routines, and audience interaction at the Comedy Cellar, a Greenwich Village club known for edgy cultural and political humor. Several months into it, I became so familiar with the jokes and routines of the regular line-up that I could almost recite them with the comedians. That's when my interest shifted to and crystallized around the audience.

I began to really pay attention to what got the patrons' attention. When was their laughter raucous, and when was it nervous? Which topics were successful, and which weren't? When was the audience engaged, and when was it restless? I noticed a rhetorical dance: each night and over time, the comedians adjusted their narratives to meet audience reaction. When a joke bombed they stopped using it. When one succeeded they used it night after night. It was a prime example of demand driving a narrative agenda.

I also noticed a few things about the supply. Most obvious, the comedians were overwhelmingly men. They regularly inserted their own life experience into the narrative by discussing something they unexpectedly noticed or experienced. Demand

was satisfied at least in part when the comedian was able to connect to the audience in a personal way.

It was the year America invaded Iraq, but that news didn't dominate the narrative agenda at the Comedy Cellar. Instead, comedians there focused on three areas: 1.) racial and ethnic empowerment; 2.) their own frustrating and awkward sexual experiences; and 3.) the ethos of the mainstream media.

I identified two dynamics that I later learned Sigmund Freud had noted a century earlier in his writing on "tendentious jokes," those with a particular object to ridicule.¹¹ First, jokes act partly as verbal dreams. We use them unconsciously to reconcile troubled or ruptured relationships. Second, jokes are attempts to seduce and subvert. When the audience laughs at a joke, it is – perhaps unconsciously – joining the comedian in an ersatz alliance (however temporarily and sometimes only within the fantasy confines of the room) against that person or situation that is the object of the joke.

And I noticed that the three areas that were most often topics for the tendentious jokes told at the Comedy Cellar were all areas in which white males, the group that for generations has dominated social and cultural life in America, tend to feel they are losing power.

The other ethnography was less formal academically, but my observations are equally important. It involved a group of people I found through a Columbia University

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1960). The observations above apply to what Freud refers to as "tendentious jokes." Tendentious jokes make a point at someone else's expense, such as stereotypical humor about unethical lawyers or stupidity of women with blond hair. They are not the harmless type, which rely simply on a clever rhetorical phrase or double entendre.

list serve. I placed an ad asking to interview or observe people who got political information from non-news sources (such as commercial television). An interesting response led me to a family on the Upper West Side who gathered weekly in an informal ritual of sorts with a half-dozen or so friends and neighbors to watch *The West Wing*.

In the geographic shadow of 9-11 and as Bush was preparing to take America to war, this ad hoc community of highly educated liberals was using a weekly fictional narrative by Andrew Sorkin to launch critical conversation about how decisions were made in the executive branch of government. They studied the interactions of archetypal characters such as the president, his personal aide, his political director, his communications director, the White House press secretary and others. And they talked passionately before and after the show about real issues facing the country. They were not looking for balance or objectivity. They were using Sorkin's narrative to connect to each other and process real issues of American public policy. The experience also manifested itself outside the group. These people would feel a special kinship or connection to others based on a supposition of shared values when they would encounter someone else who also was a devoted follower of *The West Wing*.

During the summer and fall of 2004, I continued my fieldwork with participant observation on the set of *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn*, a comedic roundtable on public affairs that mirrors the trademark format made famous by *The McLaughlin*

Group. Tough Crowd followed *The Daily Show* each night on Comedy Central.¹²

Originally, I was considering a case study of *Tough Crowd* for this project, but that idea fell through when network executives placed it on hiatus in October and replaced it after the election with *The Colbert Report*.

During the next six-to-eight months, I continued my research with regular observation at tapings of both *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. During that time I also completed the last of nine journalistic interviews with comedians and journalists who reported on or made jokes about the 2004 presidential campaign. They include Tom Edsall, Ron Hutchison, Rob Kutner, Alexandra Pelosi, Colin Quinn, Modi Rosenfeld, Wayne Slater, Sherrod Small and Lizz Winstead. These key players shared valuable insight from different perspectives on the reciprocal agenda-setting nature of professional journalism and the emerging genre of fake news offered by Stewart, Quinn and later Colbert.

I concluded field research for this project in 2010, by traveling to Washington D.C. and attending *The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear*. The rally drew an unprecedented and unique gathering of nearly a quarter-million followers of Stewart and Colbert to the National Mall. I spent about thirty hours during four days before, during, and after the event observing preparations, the rally itself and its aftermath. I also conducted roughly seventy interviews with people from roughly sixteen states and the District of Columbia to understand what drew them to the rally, what roles Stewart

¹² Quinn, a former anchor for *Saturday Night Live*'s news parody "Weekend Update," was a regular at The Comedy Cellar, where I met and first interviewed him about this work. I attended regular tapings of *Tough Crowd* and conducted follow-up interviews with him off set.

and Colbert play in their attempts to understand American politics, and what they experience when they watch *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.

* * *

So, how does media dependency shape the relationship Americans have with political figures and national issues? What conditions have existed historically when citizens turn to humorists for political information, and what relationships have these humorists had with traditional news sources and technology of their day? And how do citizens in twenty-first century America use these humorists to connect to political events and public life and/or circumvent political and journalistic institutions they widely perceive as failing?

This study doesn't extend survey work that shows people get political information from comedy shows on late-night television. Nor does it buy into claims that Stewart and Colbert are pioneers of a new type of journalism. It adds to the scholarly conversation about the parapolitical talk identified with Stewart, Colbert and others in four ways:

First, it offers a transdisciplinary review of scholarly literature that shows how and why citizens use media as a tool to connect to public life in a free society. This provides a context for exploring citizen expectations of modern journalism and the cost to our social fabric when citizens lose faith in independent journalism.

Second, it uses archival research to craft a historical look at satire as a literary genre that has existed for thousands of years in various forms – but in recent centuries, especially in America, has been intertwined with journalism and the mass

communications media that distribute it. This frame supports Stewart's claim that he follows in the ancient tradition of humorous cynics and gadflies. It also lays the groundwork for comparative findings that question scholars who argue that he and others have created a new type of journalism.

Third, it relies on additional archival work to identify technological, economic and political forces that created an upheaval in the journalism industry during the later part of the twentieth century (and first part of the new millennium), a time when many Americans needed reliable information to reassure them in the face of a troubled economy, disastrous wars, and political incompetence. This shows how events not of Stewart's making created a vacuum in public conversation that he stepped into and successfully filled.

Finally, it presents a firsthand account of an unprecedented event that drew a quarter million Americans to see Stewart perform at the National Mall the weekend before the 2010 congressional elections. That work gives more direct voice than previous scholarship to citizens who look to these voices for cues about how to negotiate politics at a contentious time in our history.

This isn't an examination of *The Daily Show* per se. It is a study of the national conversation we have about politics largely around presidential politics and during presidential campaigns. This paper shows how Stewart really came to prominence during the 2004 campaign and how his work has shaped the way journalism and American democracy function ever since. It may be seen metaphorically as a case study

of what happens to longstanding channels of communication in an old neighborhood when a new family moves in.

Academically, it's a communication study modeled in the tradition of the cultural approach to communications pioneered by James Carey, who viewed the study of communication as an opportunity to examine the social process wherein specific forms are created, apprehended and used.¹³ Carey argued that the more common and dominant transmission model of communication, which is based on the movement of information over distance for the purpose of control (the old effects tradition), may be enhanced by a ritual model, which is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time.¹⁴

If American democracy is a system supported by ritual communication, the most important single conversation comes during the national dialogue Americans have every four years when they take stock of their values and the direction their country is headed and elect a president and Congress to chart the course for the future.

The following chapters aren't a direct report of findings from the specific research projects mentioned earlier. That research, however, was fundamental to understanding the public demand for and reaction to the satire offered by Stewart and others. The work here follows Carey's so-called "interpretive turn," which draws together a range of transdisciplinary scholarship and methodology to examine the increasingly complex relationship between satire and journalism in American politics.

¹³ James Carey, *Communication as Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 30.

¹⁴ Carey 15-8.

Chapter 1. “Introduction” lays out the path that this research followed from my early question: “How do people who don’t read newspapers learn about politics and public affairs?” It traces steps I took with early social science work that resulted in papers presented at major conferences and a major ethnographic study of stand-up comedy. It summarizes the initial research on this topic and shows how this paper adds to that work.

Chapter 2. “Politics, Humor and Mass Media” opens the discussion with a scholarly look at how we discuss: modern American politics, comedy and satire, and how media convey messages between them. It draws on survey data from Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the Annenberg Public Policy Center, and the Project For Excellence in Journalism to pinpoint when the concept of satire known as “fake news” became part of our modern political discussion. It traces the idea of media dependency, beginning with Plato’s Cave allegory and Walter Lippmann’s theories of stereotypes and the “pictures in our heads.” It also draws on John Dewey and C. Wright Mills for insight into how media work to enhance or inhibit public dialog, and introduces Jones’ and Baym’s claims about Stewart and others using humor as a vehicle to craft a new type of political discourse.

Chapter 3. “It Takes a Village Idiot” traces the historic role satire has played as a form of political communication in Western culture. It identifies satire as a specific literary genre that emerged during the Greek and Roman eras, was used at key moments during the European Enlightenment, and has been a steady part of American political discourse since the Colonial Era. It draws on Orrin Klapp’s work on social typing to

establish the archetypical way “heroes, villains and fools” operate in cultures and the narratives that record them. It also considers Orrin Klapp’s work on social types (heroes, villains and fools) and Stephanie Koziski’s idea of the standup comedian as cultural anthropologist. This information sustains Stewart’s claim that he and his work fall within the long venerable tradition of Western political satire, and that he does not pretend to be a postmodern journalist or new age politician.

Chapter 4. “The End of Omniscience” documents political, technological and economic factors – all well outside of Stewart’s influence – that contributed to a cultural sea change in American political conversation at the end of the twentieth century. Examples include repeal of the Fairness Doctrine and deregulation of cable television, rising public suspicion about the fairness and accuracy of mainstream media, changes in the economic structure of network news that increased the pressure for ratings, the experiment in civic journalism, and the widespread use of the Internet – first as a new way to distribute news reported by traditional media, but eventually as a medium itself that is still expanding and producing new forms of discourse and journalistic ethos. These developments all occurred over a prolonged period economic uncertainty for media that traditionally are funded by advertising revenue. Together, it’s all led to a shift away from the ethos of objectivity, which Michael Schudson shows began in the 1960s. The concept of a “Late Night Effect” delves specifically into late-night television as a longstanding locus for American political narrative. It recalls the work of Jack Paar, Dick Cavett and Tom Snyder as well as the incomparable Johnny Carson, who had a serendipitous role in creating *Saturday Night Live*, which offered the first

widely successful “fake news” segment on American TV: Weekend Update. It includes data from initial quantitative studies of political narrative in late-night comedic monologues and shows an arbitrariness of the news/ entertainment distinction.

Chapter 5. “Humor as Journalism?” examines circumstances where Stewart in particular is publicly held to standards such as fairness and veracity that are common for professional journalists, but inappropriate as criteria for humor. It considers commentary about his confrontation with CNBC *Mad Money* host Jim Cramer which, coupled with his legendary appearance on Crossfire during the 2004 presidential campaign, shows circumstances in which Stewart clearly steps beyond the role of comic. The Crossfire episode is where he first spoke as a voice for disaffected citizens, who had long been alienated by and displeased with the political talk offered as news on cable television. Stewart effectively challenged the “mass media” as Mills defines it to return to a “public media” that would operate in line with Dewey’s idea of facilitating a conversation that would turn “a great society” into “a great community.” His plea to his hosts to “stop, stop, stop hurting America” showed his gut-level connection with *Crossfire*’s audience and other politically engaged Americans and placed him in sharp contrast to the professional political and media classes his work satirizes, and gave voice to the demand side of the American political conversation. It was the launching point for a long public conversation that culminated seven years later with Stewart’s rally on the National Mall.

Chapter 6. “The Restoration of Sanity” offers an ethnographic view of *The Rally to Restore Sanity and/ or Fear*. It chronicles the most extensive gathering of citizen

news consumers yet for a Stewart-led event. Interviews conducted over four days give new insight into what motivates people to turn to Stewart and other satirists for information about public affairs. It also examines criticisms leveled at Stewart's from the corporate media his work criticizes, and draws on one of the few public interviews Stewart has given to parse claims Stewart makes about his work and whether they hold up in the historical contexts presented earlier of satire, late-night television and the traditions of American political discourse.

Chapter 7. "Epilogue " brings the findings and discussion from the previous chapters to bear on the idea of a news-entertainment distinction and on claims that Stewart has broken that barrier, which are the foundation of other scholarship on this topic. It draws on *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, the materialist view of history Marx uses to argue that events can draw men into historic roles they did not plan for themselves, to make the case that a thorough examination of Stewart requires archival research that places him in historical context and documents the economic, social and political forces at work in America for at least a decade before Stewart appeared on the scene. It revisits some key findings from other scholarship, pinpoints areas where this study adds to that work and concludes with my own thoughts on how Stewart fits into what Foucault has called our "regime of truth."

* * *

This project shows how it's taken Stewart just a few short years to go from elective entertainment to required viewing for anyone who wants to fully understand what is happening in American politics. He's clearly more than a comedian who

comments on the national conversation; he's a major part of it. And he's earned that place by ushering in – and becoming in large part the face of – a key change to the traditional process.

For much of the twentieth century, our national political conversation happened largely like this: Events happened during the day. Journalists gathered facts and reaction to them, and they told people what they had learned on television that night. People watched those reports and went to bed feeling like they understood what had happened.¹⁵ In some cases, they discussed things in coming days with family and coworkers (the so-called “water cooler talk”), and national magazines offered further interpretation in weekly or monthly editions.

Stewart stepped into the conversation at a time when Americans were looking for something more, and the product he offered helped them change the process they used to know what is happening in their worlds. Events still happen during the day, and journalists still gather facts and reaction to them. New technology allows news organizations to give people information more often and much faster through Internet news sites and cable television. But the big change is that people are no longer content with the conversation stopping with the nightly news. These days, people – and increasingly journalists – wait for Stewart to have his say. The reaction Stewart and his comedic colleagues have to national news reports has become part of the conversation. Sometimes it's the water cooler talk, but often it's newsworthy in itself.

¹⁵ Brian Williams, “New Thought Leaders No. 2 Jon Stewart” *Newsweek* 2010. <http://2010.newsweek.com/top-10/new-thought-leaders/jon-stewart.html>

To his viewers, Stewart acts as an ombudsman of sorts. He's part of a system of checks and balances they rely on. In their world, politicians say something, journalists report it, and Stewart critiques those reports. In the twentieth century, people would wait for the broadcast network anchors to fully inform them. In the twenty-first century, Americans wait for Stewart later that night to show them whether or how broadcast networks and cable news worked on their behalf or failed them.

Stewart is neither the first political humorist nor the first media critic. He's also not the first to blend the two. The discussion about what accounts for his success and where he should be placed in a discussion of the political economy of modern American media is complex. My way into it begins with a look at what it means that Stewart does comedy.

The coarseness that ebbs and flows through American politics began to rise again during the latter part of the 1990s with the Clinton impeachment and the contentious and questionable election of George W. Bush. At the same time, deregulation of radio and cable television and the advent of the Internet were creating unprecedented opportunities for new media companies, programs and personalities to emerge and to compete for advertiser dollars. As the number of news suppliers rose, competition for audience attention stiffened, and many of those companies, programs and personalities turned to a tried-and-true method of getting people's attention: conflict.

Conflict is one of many elements journalists look for when trying to decide what may make a strong news story. Narratives built around an identifiable conflict generally are cheaper than investigative or educational work, and they are relatively easy to

contrive. During the past two decades, the old adage that there are two sides to every story has given producers of programs such as *Crossfire* a reliable template - - despite the fact that the narratives it produced often degenerated into little more than shouting matches between two personalities or voices picked to purposefully represent two opposing views. The coarseness was there, and public affairs programs – especially those on cable TV – were quick to capitalize on it.

Stewart and his work run against that grain. His use of humor makes him the ombudsman people want to hear.

Stewart demonstrates how politics are in many ways their own great comedy show. He is a comedian, and *The Daily Show* is a comedy show on the Comedy Central Network. Stewart finds the humor in daily happenings at the White House, the Capitol and on the campaign trail. The difference between the comedy that happens there and the comedy that happens on set of *The Daily Show* is that Stewart's comedy is purposeful.¹⁶ His audience comes to the show each night with a sense that their traditional connections to public life – their elected representatives and the news media that chronicle their actions – are failing. Stewart's humor reaffirms that feeling without the coarseness they find on cable news. He validates their instinct without demagoguery or fear-mongering.

Liberals such as Lizz Winstead and conservatives such as Tucker Carlson have criticized Stewart for not being tougher on politicians who appear on his program. But Stewart's job isn't to be tough. His job is to create a show that is funny and as popular

¹⁶ C. Riggers, "Jon Stewart, The Second Best Host of The Daily Show," *Fussypucker*.
<<http://www.fussypucker.net/dailyshow.htm>>

as possible. (He's just as vulnerable to ratings and the need to sell audience eyes to advertisers as the cable news programs that depend on coarseness and conflict to grab and hold people's attention.) He's been consistent about the distinction he sees between his work and the work of cable news hosts, and that has drawn a separate round of criticism from people who argue that he tries to have the privileges of an opinion leader while hiding behind the lack of responsibility afforded a stand-up comedian.

That criticism re-emerged last year in the wake of Stewart's *Rally to Restore Sanity*, one of three key moments when he has been widely seen as stepping beyond his usual routine and leveling pointed criticism directly at the national media. The other two (both discussed in Chapter 5) were his 2004 appearance on *Crossfire* and the 2009 allegations he levied against CNBC *Mad Money* host Jim Cramer. On *Crossfire*, Stewart called attention to the fact that the so-called "debate shows" CNN and other cable networks offer as political discourse actually are disingenuous, highly scripted and contrived. He presumed to speak for viewers, voters and American citizens when he told the hosts that they were actually working for politicians and that America could benefit if they would offer honest debates closer to the model presented by BBC. In the case of CNBC, he called-out the "financial news shows" on similar grounds. He charged that the information they peddle is designed to provide a platform for corporate public relations, and he again pointed to models for business news in other countries where reporters provide sound financial analysis rather than hyperbole and "predictions."

The *Rally to Restore Sanity* was arguably the highpoint of Stewart's career.

The fact that he was able to draw more than 200,000 people to the National Mall, a center for our public life, on the weekend before a national election, elevated him well beyond status of a cable television personality. At the rally, Stewart effectively claimed that the harsh, divisive nature of cable news has not created our problems, but the conflict-driven approach it uses to present them to the public makes it much harder for us to solve them. Criticism Stewart got from liberals and democrats, who questioned his message, and from cable news hosts, who raised the longstanding charge he was trying to have it both ways, fell along familiar lines.

This project ends with Stewart's response to those charges, but more important as an audience study it raises an interesting new question: Is it actually Stewart's audience that wants to have it both ways?

CHAPTER 2

POLITICS, HUMOR AND MASS MEDIA

It's difficult to cite the moment when Stewart and the so-called "fake news" he offers became part of our modern political conversation. However, a key event in that shift came in January 2004, when the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press released its biennial media-use survey. That study showed quantitatively that – at least according to self reports - Americans were moving in significant numbers away from broadcast TV news and toward cable shows and the Internet for news about the presidential campaign.¹⁷

The big news in the survey, according to Pew, was that the Internet, a relatively minor source for campaign news in 2000, was on par with traditional outlets such as public television broadcasts, Sunday morning news programs and weekly news magazines. Cable networks such as CNN and Fox News showed only a modest gain (up 4 percent from 2000) as a regular source for campaign news, but that was enough to boost the cable news networks into second place behind local TV news because the audience share for network news and daily newspapers had declined so much.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, *Cable and Internet Look Large in Fragmented Political News Universe*, 11 Jan. 2004. The survey sampled 1,506 adults Dec. 19-Jan. 4. < <http://people-press.org/report/200/cable-and-internet-loom-large-in-fragmented-political-news-universe>>

Table. 1. Where Americans Learn About the Candidates and Campaign

Regularly Learn Something From ...	2000	2004	Change %
Local TV news	48%	42%	-6%
Cable news networks	34%	38%	+4%
Nightly network news	45%	35%	-10%
Daily newspaper	40%	31%	-9%
TV news magazines	29%	15%	-4%
Morning TV shows	18%	20%	+2%
Talk radio	15%	17%	+2%
Cable political talk	14%	14%	0%
National Public Radio	12%	14%	+2%
Sunday Political TV	15%	13%	-2%
Internet	9%	13%	+4%
Public TV shows	12%	11%	-1%
Web sites of news organizations	---	11%	---
News magazines	15%	10%	-5%
News pages of ISPs	---	10%	---
Late night TV shows	9%	9%	0%
C-SPAN	9%	8%	+1%
Comedy TV shows	6%	8%	2%
Religious radio	7%	5%	-2%
Online news magazines	---	2%	---

Source: Pew Research Center for People & the Press, January 2004

The overall gain comedy TV shows showed in terms of being a source of news was negligible (up from 6 percent to 8 percent). However, cross-tabulations and regression analyses showed a huge spike within that number among 18-to-29 year olds. Twenty-one percent of the people in that age group said they “regularly” learned about the campaign and the candidates from comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show*. That was more than twice the number (9 percent) who said they did in 2000.¹⁸ Overall, nearly 50 percent said they at least “sometimes” learned about the campaign from comedy shows, nearly twice the number as with the 30-to-49 age group and four times the rate as with people 50 years old and older. According to Pew:

For many young people, the content of the jokes sketches and appearances on these programs is not just a repeat of old information. Respondents who said they regularly or sometimes learned about the campaign from these programs were asked if they ever learn things they had not head before, and nearly half said they had learned something new.

Table 2. Learning While Laughing

Learn about the campaign from ...	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
Comedy Shows*				
Regularly	21%	6%	5%	2%
Sometimes	29%	21%	9%	9%
Late Night TV**				
Regularly	13%	7%	7%	9%

¹⁸ In the 2004 survey, Pew offered *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* to respondents as examples of “comedy shows on TV.” In 2000, it offered *Saturday Night Live* and *Politically Incorrect*.

Sometimes	31%	20%	8%	14%
Number of cases	(276)	(596)	(343)	(278)

Source: Pew Research Center for People & the Press, January 2004

* such as *Saturday Night Live* or *The Daily Show*

** such as Jay Leno or David Letterman

Pew placed the information about young voters and comedy shows in the lead of its findings summary immediately after the finding that there has been further erosion in the audience of broadcast news (and daily newspapers). Researchers concluded:

Young people, by far the hardest to reach segment of the political news audience, are abandoning mainstream sources of election news and increasingly citing alternative outlets, including comedy shows such as *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live* as their source for election news.

(When Pew asked the same question in its 2008 media-use survey, the number of all Americans who said they regularly got political information from late-night comedy shows stayed the same. However, the percent of Americans under 30 who said they regularly got political information from those shows dropped significantly to 12 percent.¹⁹)

Pew's decision to study political humor on late-night television was hardly groundbreaking, even in 2000. By then, Americans were well accustomed to late-night comedians making jokes about the president and other political figures. The phenomenon actually emerged in the late 1980s as the Iran-Contra scandal unfolded and

¹⁹ A writers' strike that largely forced reruns onto the air was underway at the time the 2008 survey was in the field. Therefore, respondents were asked to think back to when the shows were first run and to recall how much they learned about the campaign from those shows.

the Bush-Dukakis campaign, which began with high expectations, developed into a massive national disappointment.²⁰ And it gained momentum during the Clinton presidency.

The Center for Media and Public Affairs began monitoring politically oriented content of monologues on late-night talk shows in 1989. In 2002, it released findings of an extensive content analysis that showed from January 1989 to April 2002 Jay Leno told 21,245 politically oriented jokes. Letterman offered 16,118 during the same period.²¹ The frequency of those jokes reached its highest point during the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

Also in the late 1980s, *Saturday Night Live* returned to its rich tradition of presidential satire that began a decade earlier with Chevy Chase's slap-stick parodies of Gerald Ford falling down and knocking over sets. Network censors had effectively banned sketches about Ronald Reagan for fear that the public would not accept comedic critique of a popular president.²²

The Pew studies did, however, give the popular press the news peg it needed to begin writing about Stewart as the face of the phenomenon. They also served as a springboard for a host of other studies by scholars and news industry groups. Key findings of other studies between 2004-8 show:

²⁰ The 1988 presidential campaign was the first election since 1960 where neither party had an incumbent seeking re-election. The race began with the most wide-open nomination process in a generation and ended with the lowest voter turnout since 1924, according to the American Presidency Project. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/turnout.php>>

²¹ S. Robert Lichter and Linda S. Lichter, "Politics by Punchline: Political Humor on Late Night TV 1989-2002," *The Media Monitor*, Vol. XVI No. 3, May/ June 2002.

²² Tom Shales and Andrew Miller, *Live From New York: An Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2003), 223.

- Viewers of late-night comedy programs, especially *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, were more likely to know the issue positions and backgrounds of the 2004 presidential candidates than people who did not watch late-night comedy.²³
- Viewers of *The Daily Show* tend to show more cynicism toward the electoral system and the news media. After being exposed to jokes about the 2004 presidential candidates, they rated the candidates more negatively, even when partisanship and other demographic variables were taken into account.²⁴
- In 2004, there was more humor than substance on *The Daily Show*, but there was more hype than substance in broadcast newscasts. And given that paradigm, a direct comparison found *The Daily Show* is just as substantive in its news reporting as network news.²⁵
- Stories chosen for *The Daily Show* newscast in 2007 were largely the same stories featured on cable news talk shows. The program's focus is clearly on politics, but the press itself is also a significant target with *The Daily Show* giving roughly twice the coverage to mainstream media as the mainstream media gives itself.²⁶

²³ Annenberg Public Policy Center, "Daily Show Viewers Knowledgeable About Presidential Campaign," September 2004.
<http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/Downloads/Political_Communication/NAES/2004_03_late-night-knowledge-2_9-21_pr.pdf>

²⁴ Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris, "The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy and American Youth," *American Politics Research*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (May 2006).

²⁵ Julia R. Fox, Glory Koloen and Volkan Sahin, "No Joke: A Comparison of Substance in *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and Broadcast Network Television Coverage of the 2004 Presidential Election Campaign," *Journal of Broadcast and Electronic Media*, June 2007.

- In 2007, Republicans bore the brunt of ridicule from Stewart, who targeted them three times as often as he did Democrats. The Bush Administration was the focus of almost a quarter (22 percent) of the segments. The line-up of on-air guests was relatively balanced, but researchers noted a subjective sense that Republicans faced harsher interviews.²⁷
- Entertainment shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* may not be as influential in teaching voters about political issues and candidates as was previously thought. The shows are influential in forming impressions about candidates based on their backgrounds, but are not as useful for learning about the issues and political procedures central to an election.²⁸

Recently, the conversation about Stewart, *The Daily Show*, and the idea of comedy and satire as news has taken a more qualitative turn.

Jeffrey Jones reminds us that Stewart's success on Comedy Central came nearly a decade after Dennis Miller and Bill Maher pioneered their own highly successful comedy news shows on cable networks. (*Politically Incorrect* ran 1993-6 on Comedy Central and 1997-2002 on ABC, and *Dennis Miller Live* ran 1994-2002 on HBO.)²⁹ His comparative study of the three programs shows how they became a forum for new

²⁶ Project for Excellence in Journalism, "Journalism, Satire or Just Laughs? *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* Examined," May 2008.

< <http://www.journalism.org/node/10953>>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Mie Kim Young and John Vishak, "Just Laugh! You Don't Need to Remember: The Effects of Entertainment Media on Political Information Acquisition and Information Processing in Political Judgment," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 58, Issue 2 (June 2008): 338-60.

²⁹ *Politically Incorrect* was nominated for seventeen Emmy Awards and won three. *Dennis Miller Live* was nominated for sixteen Emmy Awards and won five.

voices to challenge policies advanced by political elites as well as the logic behind those policies. In doing so, he claims, they redefined traditional assumptions about who gets to speak about politics on television, what issues will be covered and in what manner, and how audiences can use television to engage politics rather than simply deferring to expert knowledge. Jones argues that these practices challenge longstanding lines between news and entertainment that characterized the network era but increasingly were seen as artificial.³⁰ Those findings are the basis for Jones's claim that these shows constitute "new political television," a genre of programming characterized by biting humor and satire mixed with honest and commonsensical talk by people not directly linked to the political establishment.³¹

Geoffrey Baym builds on the narrative-based themes of "new political television." He takes the position that *The Daily Show* operates within a new and growing media environment shaped by technological multiplication, economic consolidation and discursive integration, a landscape in which actual news is becoming increasingly hard to find.³² He rejects the vernacular "fake news" as a synonym for "new political television" and claims *The Daily Show* is instead an experiment in journalism that uses methods found in traditional news, comedy and television talk shows "to revive a journalism of critical inquiry and advance a model of deliberative democracy."³³

³⁰ Jones, x.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Baym.

Baym draws on a range of scholars to support his claim that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* represent a postmodern form of journalism. Borrowing from Thomas Kuhn he notes “the history of news reveals that journalism has never been a singular entity; rather, one can define a number of different paradigms that have been taken shape over time.”³⁴ He argues there’s a historical trajectory that begins with Walter Cronkite and the broadcast journalism of the network age, and ends at least for now with Stewart and Colbert “at the vanguard of our fragmented, post-network moment of journalistic instability and exploration.”³⁵

In a recent public conversation with Jones, Baym restated an idea central to his work: that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are a necessary reaction to the decline of democratically useful news and public affairs programming. He cited a “narrative of decline” in the writing of Jurgen Habermas, James Carey, Daniel Hallin and others to support his claim that the ethos of American news and public information institutions has shifted from the high-modern paradigm that marked the network age of the mid-to-late twentieth century to a postmodern model of “commodified televisual spectacle.” He also argued that both shows have a discursive or social effect: They simultaneously encourage active engagement and conversation, and facilitate new forms

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Geoffrey Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2010) 4.

³⁵ Ibid.

of political speech – and that presents an opportunity to consider citizenship (as Carey would note) not as something one has but as something one does.³⁶

Jones returns to civic engagement, a subtext of his early work, and notes that a vital component of democratic citizenship is representation - or simply the belief that one is being represented. He reminds us that “new political television” is shaped by issues of representation: it matters that the public is calling for new voices to appear on television from outside the traditional realm of political discussion. He argues that new political television rose in part because audience sought non-traditional voices within media to represent them as well as opportunities to participate discursively and in doing so represent themselves. He concludes that the “informed citizen” model that Michael Schudson described as dominating much of the twentieth century is gone, and he questions whether it is being replaced by a model more in line with what John Dewey and Carey advocated for: an invigorated polity that has some role to play in crafting the political world through communicated acts than those that dominated the previous norms of citizenship, dependent as they were on representation by experts and political professionals.³⁷

* * *

Media scholars and philosophers note that a central role of mass media is to provide citizens with information about their world (Lippmann, 1922; Lasswell, 1948;

³⁶ Jeffrey P. Jones and Geoffrey Baym, “A Dialogue on Satire News and the Crisis of Truth in Postmodern Political Television,” Hye Jin Lee, ed., 2010.

³⁷ Ibid.

Mills, 1956; Gans, 1979; and others). Even Plato (517 B.C.), hardly known as a “communications scholar,” crafted the Cave Allegory to help explain how people can be fooled into believing they know about their world when they rely on images rather than firsthand experience. Lippmann argued that “pictures in our heads” of the world outside – specifically, the world beyond firsthand experience – come from mass media, and that using media images, which he calls stereotypes, is an altogether unsatisfactory and incomplete way to think.³⁸ Lasswell deconstructed the communication process and included the delivery system, “in what channel,” as a key aspect of his paradigm: who, says what, to whom, in which channel and to what effect.³⁹ Mills used a sociological eye to observe the way modes of communication separate publics from masses and warned that mass society may be a rest stop along the road to totalitarianism.⁴⁰ Gans focused on corporate, mainstream journalism, a specific genre of communication, and examined the values and ideology of a profession that claims (arguably) that its objective and non-ideological ethos is its great strength.⁴¹

More recently, media theorists claim that citizens develop a “media dependency” that varies based on individual goals and media resources.⁴² They argue

³⁸ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1922).

³⁹ Harold Lasswell, “The Communication of Ideas,” Edited by L. Bryson. *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1948).

⁴⁰ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

⁴¹ Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*, (New York: Random House, 1979).

⁴² De Fleur, M. & Ball-Rokeach, S. *Theories of Mass Communication*. 5th edition. New York: Longman, 1989.

that media dependency plays an important role in social understanding. Along with Lippmann, they also take the position that ambiguity results when people lack the firsthand information they need to create social meaning, so people draw on media consciously and unconsciously to construct reality.⁴³

Understanding media dependency is essential to understanding modern American politics. Most people have little direct contact with politicians, so they get most of their political information from the mass media.⁴⁴ However, the media environment, which Noelle Neuman (1996) calls the “infrastructure” of political communication, is changing. It is important to note that not all communication or use of mass media is journalism; journalism has a specific function in our society and specific protections ingrained in our founding documents.⁴⁵ Three distinct structural transformations – technological, economic and cultural – are reshaping the boundaries that defined journalism during much of the twentieth century and the role it played during that time as the primary instrument of political communication in the public sphere.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ball-Rokeach, S., “A Theory of Media Power and a Theory of Media Use: Different Stories, Questions and Ways of Thinking,” *Mass Communication & Society*, 1998, Vol. 1 No. 1/2.

⁴⁴ Fox, Koloen & Sahin.

⁴⁵ Carey, J. *Crucible of Liberty: 200 Years of the Bill of Rights*. Edited by Raymond Arsenault. “A Republic, If You Can Keep It: Liberty and Public Life in the Age of Glasnost.” (New York: Free Press, 1991).

⁴⁶ Bennett, W. L. and Entman, R. M. 2001. *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press).

In terms of technology, the rapid growth of cable television and satellite delivery systems has given Americans an unprecedented number of channels that deliver news with unprecedented speed in unprecedented amounts.⁴⁷ In addition, the Internet and hand-held, computer-based video and editing systems have lowered significantly the threshold of production both in terms of capital investment and skilled labor (Baym, 2005). These developments have helped create an easily accessible and relatively unchecked information environment, expanding the boundaries of the public sphere to a “communicative space of infinite size.”⁴⁸

In terms of economics, broadcast journalism is facing its own version of the crisis that is shrinking the newspaper industry. The financial monopoly that NBC, CBS and ABC once held with their evening newscasts is under assault by a variety of programming strategies that include the latest version of network “news lite,” local news “happy talk” and 24-hour cable news punditry.⁴⁹ The increasingly competitive battle for the advertising revenue that funds corporate newscasts is threatening the basic principles of good journalism, as independence, inquiry and verification are sacrificed regularly for salacious content.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2001).

⁴⁸ McNair, B., *Journalism and Democracy: An Evaluation of the Political Public Sphere*, (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁴⁹ Baym, G., “Packaging Reality: Structure of Form in U.S. Network News Coverage of Watergate and the Clinton Impeachment,” *Journalism*, Vol. 5. 2005.

⁵⁰ Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T. *Warp Speed: America in the Age of Mixed Media*, (New York: Century Foundation Press, 1999).

Broadcast television networks were America's primary source of news and information about presidential elections for much of the second half of the twentieth century.⁵¹ These networks still have millions more viewers and draw the largest audience for overall news programming during the traditional evening news hour,⁵² but cable networks with their repetitive 24-hour news cycle passed then during the 2000 presidential campaign as our primary source of political campaign information.⁵³

The rise in the number of television networks and other media outlets has been offset by a consolidation of ownership among a few giant media firms.⁵⁴ These conglomerates are horizontally and vertically integrated, and structured to share resources, personnel and approaches to content among individual outlets.⁵⁵ Conglomeration fosters an ethos that no longer views news as a public service but instead as a commodity packaged to sell for profit to an audience not of citizens but of consumers. The result is an approach to news that effectively abandons the idea that

⁵¹ Graber, D. "Adapting Political News to the Needs of Twenty-First Century Americans," in Bennett, W. L. and Entman, *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 433-52.

⁵² S. Johnson, "The Future of Network News: Follow the Money," *Chicago Tribune*, Sec. 6 pp 1, 8-9. 28, Nov. 2004.

⁵³ L. Lazaroff, "Audience Decline an Old Story," *Chicago Tribune*, Sec. 3 pp. 1,8, 24 Nov. 2001.

⁵⁴ McChesney, R.W., *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. (New York: New Press, 1999).

⁵⁵ Murdoch, G., "*Public Communication – The New Imperatives: Future Directions for Media Research*," Ed. M. Ferguson. *Redrawing the Map of the Communications Industries: Concentration and Ownership in the Era of Privatization*, (London: Sage, 1990.)

audiences share common interests and communal concerns and replaces it with a more segmented approach to the market based on narrow demographic appeals.⁵⁶

In terms of culture, journalism exists organically with our other institutions and social practices, and therefore has not been immune to the great social transformation from the modern to the postmodern, driven by the qualitatively new technology of satellites and computers.⁵⁷ The longstanding divide that separated the business and editorial sides of news has eroded⁵⁸ along with traditional lines that separate the public and private spheres, public affairs and popular culture, and information and entertainment.⁵⁹ Journalism largely has ceased to be a distinct activity and has morphed within the entertainment, telecommunications and computer industries. The line between what is a journalism organization and division and what is entertainment or information or even a phone call has been affected, and these changes have occurred with the encouragement of governments and entrepreneurs everywhere.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Gandy, Jr. O.H. "Dividing Practices: Segmentation and Targeting in the Emerging Public Sphere," in Bennett, W. L. and Entman, *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 141-59.

⁵⁷ James Carey, "The Press, Public Opinion and Public Discourse: On the Edge of the Postmodern," Glasser, T. and Salmon, C. T., *Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent*. (New York: Gilford, 1995).

⁵⁸ Underwood, D., "Reporting and the Push for Market Oriented Journalism: Media Organizations as Businesses," in Bennett, W. L. and Entman, *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 99-116.

⁵⁹ Della Carpini, M. X. and Williams, B. A. "Let Us Infotain You: Politics in the New Media Environment," in Bennett, W. L. and Entman, *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 160-81.

⁶⁰ Carey, 1995.

This study draws on three longstanding conversations to understand the rise of what Jones has dubbed “new political television” and how programming that epitomizes that genre also fits into the idea of and emerging “personal press.”⁶¹ They are:

- the democratic relationship between conversation and community;
- the professional history of journalism; and
- humor as an agent to reconnect journalism and community.

Conversation and Community

John Dewey, the American philosopher, educator and pragmatist, rhetorically asked 80 years ago how a great society becomes a great community. The answer he offered was simple: It engages in conversation.⁶² The question initially may seem backward; some may more naturally wonder how a community becomes a great society. But Dewey’s question is more prescient. He is concerned with something larger than population, gross economic product, empire building and the bread-and-circus required to sustain it. He is concerned with moral development.

In that context, he challenges the idea that democracy was (1,800 years after Julius Cesar crossed the Rubicon and ended the previous one) merely an ideology whose time had come - again. He examines the human condition and the difference between associated and communal activities. He considers the role mere habit plays in grand events and human destiny. And he ties it together with the assertion that the way

⁶¹ Jones, 2005.

⁶² Dewey, John, *The Public and Its Problems*, (New York: Holt, 1927).

news is disseminated matters – both physically and within the context of the frames its creators employ.

Picking up Dewey's conviction that conversation is a foundation of a free society, Carey examines the role of American journalism in our political sphere.⁶³ In the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, he challenges conventional wisdom – and to a large degree the professional self-image of many American journalists – by arguing that the role of the American press is not to inform the public. He takes the position that the American public should inform the press, because the true subject matter of journalism in a free society is the conversation its citizens have with each other.

Carey pays homage to the Poles, Czechs and other Eastern Europeans, who under Soviet domination simply tuned out the official media controlled by their governments, which they concluded wasn't trustworthy.⁶⁴ Instead, he notes, they relied on memory to create what he calls "a conversational public sphere" that kept alive their values and belief in freedom. He warns American media that when the interests of a few dominate the lives of many, those denied recognition and value lose their love for public life and chose instead to seek private pleasure.

Later, Carey discusses how national media laid the basis for mass society by laying down direct lines of access between national centers and dispersed audiences and by producing a remarkable potential for the centralization of power and authority.⁶⁵ He argues that "modern communications media allowed individuals to be linked for the

⁶³ Carey, 1991,1995.

⁶⁴ Carey, 1991.

⁶⁵ Carey, 1995.

first time, directly to the imaginary community of the nation without the mediating influence of regional and other local affiliations.” His ideas about mass society and imaginary community have roots in the works of Mills and Anderson.

Mills argues that public societies differ from a mass society by the dominant mode of communication.⁶⁶ For Mills, public societies are built on discussion; and mass media, if they exist, simply enlarge and animate that discussion, linking publics together. In mass societies, he argues, the mass media drives communication, and publics become media markets that simply receive content from mass media.

The idea that mass societies come together inside arbitrary though tangible geopolitical lines follows Anderson’s attempt to stress the New World origins of nationalism.⁶⁷ Anderson identifies an “explosive interaction between capitalism, technology and human linguistic diversity” as the force that drives the history of nationalism. He takes the position that basic forms of mass media, such as the novel and newspaper, which flowered in Europe during the eighteenth century, provide a technical means for “re-presenting the kind of imagined community that was the nation.”

Canadian economist Harold Innis laid some groundwork for Anderson (and later Carey). Innis examines the social history of communication media and argues that the

⁶⁶ Mills.

⁶⁷ Bennett Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1983).

type of media that dominate a culture directly affect that culture's stability.⁶⁸ His examination asks:

- How do specific communication technologies operate?
- What assumptions do they take from and contribute to society?
- What forms of power do they encourage?

Innis claims that the media systems privilege and repress communication and shape society's institutions and practices (largely choosing between time and space). That systematic bias, he argues, affects the way a society is viewed by its citizens and outsiders.

Professional History of Journalism

Carey identifies a "modern era of journalism" that stretches from the 1890s to the 1970s, beginning with the birth of the national magazine, the development of the mass urban newspapers, the domination of news dissemination by the wire services and the creation of early primitive forms of electronic communication.⁶⁹ He points to the early twentieth century as a time when newspapers (the primary media of the day) effectively broke away from political patrons and established themselves at least in principle as independent with their only loyalty "to an abstract truth and an abstract

⁶⁸ Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951).

⁶⁹ Carey's model has been criticized as overly simplistic, in part because he doesn't account for the contrary and very strong traditions of the yellow press, which was more popular than the more objective *Times* in the 1890s or for the persistence of the opinion press. Schudson and other scholars also question the relationship Carey sees between journalism and the social practice of conversation.

public interest.” This is the time (post WWI), as Schudson shows, that the concept of objectivity rose as the fundamental ethos of American journalism.⁷⁰

Schudson notes, contrary to the beliefs of journalists who embraced that ideal through the end of the century, the objective ethos began to break up in the 1960s. The primary cause, he writes, was generational conflict. Schudson shows that two journalistic traditions that stand against objectivity – the literary tradition and muckraking – resurfaced in the 1960s. He observes that the argument that competition with television during that era led newspapers away from objective reporting repeats an argument of the 1930s that the advantage radio had in presenting spot news forced newspapers to become more interpretive. However, in both radio and television, particularly in television, there also was a strong interest in going beyond the conventions of objectivity, and by the late 1960s, television was moving away from straight news.

The modern traveling “campaign press” emerged in the 1960s and served as the chief conduit for news about political campaigns; however, with each subsequent campaign both the makeup of the group and its rules for operation evolved along with the make-up and role of political consultants and staff hired to craft the campaign message. In 1960, Americans learned about presidential campaigns from about forty generally middle-aged men, all of whom were considered veterans of their craft and

⁷⁰ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*, New York: Basic Books, 1978).

most of whom won the right to report the campaign after long careers of merit at newspapers, magazines or radio networks.⁷¹

By 1968, public relations men and television specialists were playing key roles within the campaign apparatus, and journalists found themselves increasingly competing with narratives based on principles of product placement instead of traditional news.⁷² In 1972, the old guard was challenged by a few well-known women and an entirely new generation of edgy young males – “ambitious types who saw the job as a showcase for their talents and who, if they did well, would move up to management as bureau chiefs or key editors.”⁷³ By 1988, the cycle had come virtually full circle, and post-election analyses roundly criticized the traveling press corps, which had grown exponentially and diversified enormously, for reverting to the old habits of relying almost exclusively on narratives and photo-ops crafted by the campaigns.⁷⁴

By the end of the century, Americans were frustrated with and alienated from the so-called mainstream media, which claimed a voice of objectivity and clung to a self-notion of omniscience.⁷⁵ The type of generational challenge to media hegemony that Schudson identifies happening during the 1890s, 1930s and 1960s – challenges spawned by technological progress and cultural dissatisfaction – was underway again.

⁷¹ T. White, *The Making of the President 1960*. (New York: Atheneum, 1960).

⁷² Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President*, (New York: Penguin, 1969).

⁷³ Tim Crouse, *Boys on the Bus*, (Toronto: Ballantine, 1974).

⁷⁴ Joan Didion, “Insider Baseball,” *The New York Review of Books*. Vol. 35 No. 16, 27 Oct. 1988.

⁷⁵ Carey, 1995.

And at its core was a blend of biting humor and satire offered within a guise of commonsensical talk by people not directly connected to the political establishment.⁷⁶

Schudson argues that journalism exists apart from objectivity.⁷⁷ He defines journalism as “the business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of general interest and importance.” Its function, he writes, is communication – the social coordination of individuals and groups through shared symbols and meanings. Its product, news, is a manufactured good - “the product of a set of social, economic and political institutions and practices.” And, he argues, that despite the general neglect of news by most prestigious academic disciplines, it has become – where it was not three centuries ago or even two centuries ago – a dominant force in the public construction of common experience and a popular sense of what is real and important.

Kovach and Rosenstiel also define journalism without tying it directly to the ethos of objectivity. They see it as independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information that citizens in a free society require to actively participate in matters that affect them. They argue that the concept of “objectivity” has been so mangled that often becomes a barrier to solving challenges it was designed to address.⁷⁸

Gans writes that as a whole national news media legitimized and glorify the sources they are supposed to examine. He describes their ethos as “follow the power.”

⁷⁶ Jones, 2005.

⁷⁷ Schudson.

⁷⁸ B. Kovach and T. Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, (New York: Crown, 2001).

The effect, he argues, of this “top-down” approach is that journalists have become messengers of the very political, governmental and other entrenched interests most citizens routinely identify as untrustworthy and unresponsive.⁷⁹

Humor and the New Political Television

When Americans were asked a few years ago to name the journalist they most admired, Stewart (a stand-up comedian and Academy Award show host) tied three current or former network anchorman - Brian Williams, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather - and cable host Anderson Cooper.⁸⁰ Stewart uses the phrase “fake news” to describe his work, and he claims that his work is designed to be nothing more than comedy. However, some journalists and media critics and many fans who watch his show on a regular basis disagree. Part of the disagreement or confusion may stem from the similarities in the work stand-up comedians and journalists do. Both operate somewhat as untrained, self-appointed cultural anthropologists.

Stephanie Koziski maintains that stand-up comedians (like anthropologists) operate as participant observers of an alien group through a stance of cultural distance.⁸¹ They collect, analyze and compare features of that cultural landscape and how various persons and institutions structure reality in and around it. They put their individual stamp on their finding through the narratives they craft for their audience. The same can be said for journalists.

⁷⁹ Gans.

⁸⁰ Pew, 2007.

⁸¹ Stephanie Koziski “The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 18:2 (1984: Fall) p.57.

James Lett notes that anthropologists and journalists are both trained to observe, record, describe and if possible explain human behavior.⁸² Like anthropologists, journalists tend to be generalists. The same can be said for stand-up comedians.⁸³

Anthropologist Edward Hall argues that understanding what makes people in a particular society laugh is one way to understand the fundamental structure of that culture.⁸⁴ So, the challenge with studying humor is to resist the temptation to decree something funny or not, and instead to examine why it is funny. In short, the scholar or critic should be aware of what dynamic is at work when we convince others to laugh or when we laugh ourselves.

There is a subtext to American politics – recognized by politicians and the journalists who cover them - that making a fool out of elected leaders is good for democracy.⁸⁵ Americans expect powerful people to be appropriately self-deprecating or at least be a good sport when they are on the tough end of a joke. It's one way they reassure the public they are not above criticism.

⁸² Kosiski.

⁸³ It's worth noting that there are no training standards or professional accreditation for either journalism or stand-up comedy. A person who wants to be recognized as a journalist or a stand-up comedian merely starts working as one.

⁸⁴ Kosiski.

⁸⁵ O. Klapp, *Heroes, Villains and Fools*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962).

Sigmund Freud avoids the trap of trying to define humor and focuses on a more substantive discussion of its purpose.⁸⁶ He writes that jokes – as opposed to riddles and mere comic observations - have a specific technique: One person tells a story, hoping to convince a second person (or audience) to join him or validate his position against a third party.⁸⁷ The purpose is social, cultural or political alignment, and the laugh acts as a signifier.⁸⁸ The seduction/ alignment is further enforced when the person who heard the joke repeats it – circulates it using the oral communication tradition of conversation - to a fourth party, which can be an individual or audience.

Freud's interpretive frame can be applied to the work of the jester, trickster and fool – the predecessor to the modern solo artist or stand-up comedian - which can be found in cultures as diverse as Greece, medieval Europe and among Native Americans).

The archetype of the fool, which Stewart appropriates, can be found in the popular culture of virtually every society,⁸⁹ where it is used to: sublimate aggression,

⁸⁶ Freud's work is not definitive, and he draws criticism from a range of scholarly traditions. (Psychology departments at most American universities are scientifically oriented, and his methods fall short of the academic rigor they require. His theories also run counter to the enlightenment model of rational agency, which is a key element of much modern philosophy.) Feminists particularly have criticized the Victorian frame that surrounds his study of female patients. The upshot, as *The New York Times* (Patricia Cohen, 2007) reported, is Freud is widely taught at American universities, except in the psychology departments. His work rebounded near the end of the twentieth century with the rise in postmodernism and culture studies (Lacan, et al).

⁸⁷ Freud.

⁸⁸ Ferdinand de Saussure, *The General Course in Linguistics*. Ed. Roy Harris, (Paris: Open Court, 1986).

⁸⁹ Klapp.

relieve the mundane, control by ridicule, and affirm standards of propriety and unification through what Henri Bergson called “the communication of laughter.”⁹⁰

Lawrence Mintz considers Freud’s work and takes the position that if, as Freud believed, there is a battle going on between our raw instincts and our socially developed rules of behavior, comedy provides an opportunity for a staged antagonism. He writes:

Our contemporary humor confronts virtually everything that is important to us in ways that make us understand ourselves and our society more thoroughly more deeply, more meaningfully and at the same time in ways that make it easier to cope with our often disturbing reality.⁹¹

⁹⁰ H. Bergson, “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,” trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Routhwell, Kessinger Publishing, 2004.

⁹¹ Lawrence Mintz, ed., *Humor in America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) introduction.

CHAPTER 3

IT TAKES A VILLIAGE IDIOT

The elite of American journalism stood and applauded as President George W. Bush – American flag pin in his tuxedo lapel – made his way to the lectern in the ballroom of the D.C. Hilton Hotel. The annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner is a typically light affair where the president jokes with members of the media assigned to cover his administration.

Despite the stress building between candidates and reporters as the 2004 campaign headed into its final six months, this evening was no different. Days earlier, Bush strategists had decided to keep the foreign-policy-fiasco comedy angle out of Bush’s prepared remarks. Instead, the president served reporters who cover him day-to-day a fluffier course of self-deprecation. In the world of traditional politics and media management, it was a good call.

Washington reporters pride themselves on institutional memory. Like their counterparts outside the Beltway, they are known to use the anniversary of an unresolved or ongoing issue as a news peg to justify revisiting it. And being an experienced politician, Bush surely knew that somewhere in the minds of reporters that night was the memory of him exactly one year ago approaching a similar lectern – with a similar American flag pin in his lapel - on the USS Abraham Lincoln.

May 1, 2003, was a day for the political record books, especially the chapter on photo-ops. Bush, who was facing renewed criticism that he had skirted military service during the Vietnam War, flew a fighter plane and sat co-pilot as a navy officer landed it on the deck of the Lincoln with help from a navy pilot. In full view of the national press, he emerged from the cockpit in a camouflage flight suit and moved through the captive crowd shaking hands with American servicemen and servicewomen.

A quick change later, he appeared in a dark business suit and red tie - more appropriate for the civilian commander-in-chief of the American military – and stepped to the spot his advance team marked so TV cameras would capture him in front of a red, white and blue banner that read “Mission Accomplished.” It was a harmony of sight and sound played to crescendo: Bush’s bold announcement that major combat operations in Iraq were finished and that the United States and its allies had prevailed.

Now, a year later, 700 American soldiers were dead, and John Kerry, the decorated Vietnam War veteran Democrats had nominated to challenge Bush, was capitalizing on the administration’s handing of the war and its aftermath. Stories of insurgent violence in Iraq were dominating the front pages and the evening news, and the remarks Bush made on the carrier that day were costing him credibility and distracting from his campaign.

It was time to change course.

“It really gets me when critics say I haven’t done enough for the economy,”

Bush deadpanned to the room of familiar faces, their spouses, dates and friends. “I mean look what I’ve done for the book publishing industry.”

After a tepid response, he tried again - this time with a subtle reference to a recent gaffe.

“I was going to start off with some self-deprecating jokes,” Bush said, “but then I couldn’t think of any mistakes I had made to be self-deprecating about.”⁹²

And so it went. An uneventful Saturday evening for reporters covering the presidential race and consultants working for the Kerry campaign - both eager to exploit any misstep the president might take. For traditional reporters looking for traditional news, Bush’s remarks were in industry terms “a non-starter.”

But this wasn’t a traditional campaign.

Two days later, from his studio in midtown Manhattan, Stewart, a stand-up comedian who had parlayed “*The Daily Show*,” a floundering 30-minute comedy show built on a recap of the day’s events, into arguably the hottest forum for political punditry in America, used C-SPAN footage of the dinner to remind his audience what likely was on the minds of – but never reported by – the White House correspondents.

“He’s right. There are a lot of books saying he is an awful president,” Stewart quipped, stopping the highlight reel of Bush’s speech at the end of his remark about the economy. The studio audience burst into applause, but Stewart quieted them with a playful admonition: “Settle down. We’ll do Kerry tomorrow.”

⁹² A few months earlier, a reporter asked Bush to name a mistake he had made during his first term, and he was unable or unwilling to do so.

It was vintage Stewart: the most trusted name in “fake news.” Cover stories of *Newsweek* and *Entertainment Weekly*. One Peabody and three Emmy awards. And according to the shocking results of a respected national survey, the fastest-growing source of information about the presidential campaign for most Americans, especially young voters.⁹³

Stewart, like most Americans, seemed to know the presidential campaign for better or worse was shaping up to be a referendum on the Iraq War. Between May and November 2004, there would be the day Kerry chose a running mate. There would be two national conventions and a series of presidential and vice presidential debates. There would be charges and counter charges from both campaigns about the military records of both men. And there would be charges of bias in the mainstream media.

But in the end, this campaign would be a referendum on the war. And the importance of the one-year anniversary of Bush’s remarks on the USS Lincoln wasn’t lost on Stewart.

Sitting behind the anchor’s desk on his “fake news” set and looking into a camera that would connect him to his audience of roughly 1 million viewers, Stewart went to work.

Roll video of Bush landing on the carrier and shaking hands of military personnel while wearing his flight suit.

Cut to close-up of “Mission Accomplished” banner.

⁹³ Pew, 2004.

Cut to Bush at podium and roll audio: "Major operations in Iraq have ended.

In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed."

Pause tape. Convert video of Bush to background photo.

Cut to Stewart. "Actually, know what? Uh, as it turns out, funny story. It turns out we didn't quite as prevail (sic) as the president thought," he deadpanned to raucous applause.

He continued: "But on Friday in the Rose Garden the president put down his pruning sheers to tell reporters he stands by last year's statement."

Roll video of Bush walking out of the West Wing to a podium in the Rose Garden.

Cut to close-up of Bush and roll audio. "A year ago, I, uh, did give the speech from the carrier saying we had achieved an important objective, that we had accomplished a mission which was the removal of Saddam Hussein."

Cut back to video of Bush in front of the Mission Accomplished banner; pause and convert to background photo.

Cut to Stewart: "Of course. 'A' mission. That makes more sense. In fact, I believe it was right there on the banner all along."

Cut to close-up of the banner behind Bush on the carrier that is graphically enhanced to show a small 'a' circled in white so the altered, satirical version of the banner reads "a Mission Accomplished."

In fake news terms, the report was "a hit."

Zinger Accomplished.

Satire as Genre

Stewart's comedic skit – his so-called fake news “report” – was classic satire: a narrative or literary way to diminish someone by making him appear foolish. Some comedy exists for the simple purpose of evoking laughter, but satire is fundamentally an act of political communication, and the laughter it produces signifies that a political alliance of sorts has been struck.⁹⁴ Objects of satire can be individuals, institutions or nations. The satirical narratives that develop around them are complex constructions that typically evoke a range of responses – indignation, scorn, amusement, even comfort – sometimes simultaneously. Satire must always be examined for its subtext rather than taken at face value.

When Jonathan Swift suggested: "A young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled..."⁹⁵ he was not advocating cannibalism or infanticide. He was taking aim at callous bureaucratic British authority and the toll it had taken on the Irish people and their country's economy. When Swift penned his account of Lemuel Gulliver, marooned on an island inhabited by people one-twelfth the size of normal humans,⁹⁶ he was not reporting on the internecine war between Liliput and Blefuscu. He was taking a

⁹⁴ The reference to a “political alliance” may include but isn't necessarily limited to partisanship or politics in terms of competing organizations. Political alliances can be large formal structures or they can be individual agreements as informal as choosing one friend over another when those friends represent issues or decisions of power and social location.

⁹⁵ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels and A Modest Proposal*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

swipe at George I, squabbles between ancient traditions and modernity, and infighting among Christian denominations religions that shaped the politics of the day.

The scope of Swift's work shows an important distinction within literary satire, which generally is separated into two genres: Horatian and Juvenalian. Both can be traced to classical Roman poetry.

Juvenalian satire follows the tradition of Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis, later known as Juvenal, who wrote in the late first and early second centuries. It often employs a speaker who is a serious moralist and who uses a dignified and public style to denounce vice that is simultaneously ridiculous and dangerous.⁹⁷ The tone typically is dark, sarcastic and rage-filled. It is the template Swift adopted for *Modest Proposal*. Recent examples of Juvenalian satire include: *Clockwork Orange*, *Farenheight 451*, *South Park* and Stephen Colbert's searing lampoon of the president and national media at the 2006 White House Correspondents' Association dinner.⁹⁸

Horatian satire follows the tradition of Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65-8 B.C.), known in the English-speaking world as Horace, the leading lyric poet in the Augustan Age. This work often features a witty, urbane character who is more tolerant of the world – a speaker who in the presence of human folly is more often moved to wry amusement than righteous indignation.⁹⁹ It is playful, teasing and typically uses light-hearted, mild parody to criticize some social vice or political situation. It is the template

⁹⁷ M.H. Abrams *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston) 1981. 168-9.

⁹⁸ Speaking in character, Colbert delivered a 16-minute speech and seven-minute video that satirically skewered Bush, Peter Pace, Antonin Scalia, John McCain, Joe Wilson and others. Frank Rich later dubbed it the "defining moment" of the 2006 midterm elections.

⁹⁹ Abrams, 168.

Swift adopted for *Gulliver's Travels*. Recent examples of Horatian satire include *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Onion* and *The Simpsons*. Most stand-up comedians, including Stewart and Colbert, favor Horatian narratives.

Stewart's sketch on the anniversary of the "mission accomplished" photo-op drew largely on the Horatian tradition. The tone was neither dark nor rage-filled. He used facial expressions (including the classic comedic deadpan juxtaposed with absurd verbal statements) and amateurish markings on a high-tech visual graphic to simultaneously poke fun at the event and the way network newscasters actually covered it. And, in the literary tradition of satire – rather than simple comedy – it was essentially political communication that involved a power dynamic.

As the show continued, Stewart moved away from the Horatian tradition and adopted a Juvenalian tone. The second sketch of the evening, which in news industry terms, was "packaged" as a "special report" by one of his fellow comedians playing the role of news correspondent, examined the idea of media censorship.

Stewart informed his audience directly (no comedic angle or format) that Sinclair Broadcasting Group, a conservative Baltimore-based media company, had barred seven of its local affiliates from showing an episode of ABC's "Nightline" the previous week. He added (again without comedic gesture or device) that Sinclair executives claimed the program was unfair to Bush. His tone took a marked shift from "witty man of the world" to "righteously indignant moralist."

The night before the correspondents' dinner, *Nightline* had aired "Fallen," a special edition of the award-winning program that featured photos of American soldiers

(roughly 700 men and women in rapid succession) who had been killed in the Iraq War. Host Ted Koppel read each soldier's name as his or her photo appeared on screen.

Stewart noted that in St. Louis, Sinclair pre-empted what he called a "tribute to the fallen" with a rerun of the situation comedy "Dharma and Greg."¹⁰⁰ He also noted that Sinclair required journalists working in its news and sports divisions and its weather forecasters to end their segments with "We stand 100 percent behind our president."

Stewart told viewers that Sinclair had issued a statement that derided Koppel's broadcast as "politics disguised as news." He also told them that Sinclair executives had contributed more than \$130,000 to Bush and other Republicans during the past four years. "So clearly, they prefer their politics disguised as money," he concluded.

A close look at this segment - a look at the form and subtext not just content shows that in addition to political commentary it also was media satire an aspect of *The Daily Show* so subtle it often fails to receive its due.

The political work Stewart offers is so sharp, so funny, it often overshadows this other part of his genius: his parodies of the way American media do their jobs. But it's there, beginning with the show's lead in.

Each night, the show opens with a drumbeat reminiscent of the "drums of war" theme CNN used almost two decades ago during its nightly recap of the 1991 Gulf War.

¹⁰⁰ The show had been cancelled in 2001-02 for low ratings. The plot centered on a young attorney (Greg) from a wealthy family, who meets a free-spirited young woman (Dharma) and they get married in Reno on their first date. Their affection for each other grows as they get to know each other, but their families - hers a bunch of hippies and his snob Republicans - despise each other.

A camera focuses on a graphic representation of the planet Earth and an announcer's voice tells viewers "From studios in New York, '*The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart'". Cameras positioned as the eyes of the viewer in the sky, drop into midtown Manhattan, dodge hundreds of brightly lit buildings and bringing the viewer into Stewart's fake news studio.

Each show also follows the same routine.

Stewart opens with a recap of the top stories that day. Then, a staff comedian posing as a news correspondent often provides an in-depth look or supplemental story on a related issue (known in television news as a "package," "field piece" or "stand-up"). After a commercial break, the show resumes with an in-depth "newsmaker interview" with the show's special guest conducted live by Stewart from behind the anchor chair.

Stewart's topic is almost always national politics; the butts of his jokes are political figures, most often the president or a member of his cabinet. But his method and delivery are designed as a parody of the way American broadcast media perform.

This night, the correspondent on the media censorship story is Rob Corddry, a Boston native and Amherst graduate. Corddry has no journalism experience. His professional credits include regular appearances on "Late Night with Conan O'Brien" and the Dreamworks comedy film "Old School."

Split screen.

The skit begins with Stewart sitting behind the anchor's desk on screen left. Corddry is standing in front of a white billboard with black letters that read "The

Fallout.” The words are next to a dark vertical silhouette of a soldier’s rifle with a battle helmet hanging off the top of the gun barrel.

STEWART. Rob, critics call this “Nightline” episode politically motivated. I watched it. It was just a very dignified recitation of the names of those that had died.

CORDDRY. You put your finger on a major problem. How does one report facts in an unbiased way when the facts themselves are biased?

STEWART. I’m sorry Rob. Did you say the facts are biased?

CORDDRY. That’s right, Jon. From the names of our fallen soldiers to the gradual withdrawal of our allies to the growing insurgency, it’s become all too clear that facts in Iraq have an anti-Bush agenda. (Loud applause) What’s missing is a sense of the larger context of the war. That’s an issue I’ll be tackling tonight in Rob Corddry’s “The Context.”

STEWART. Rob. You talk about the larger context, but wasn’t the larger context of the war to destroy Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction, which he didn’t really have, so how does bringing that up really help the president?

CORDDRY. Jon, WMDs was last year’s context. You need to put that context in a larger context. This year’s context is liberation.

Stewart. But, Rob. No matter how they died, honoring their sacrifice isn’t necessarily biased.

CORDDRY. O really, Jon? Then why didn’t “Nightline” read the names of the service people when they were alive? Does FOX have to do everything?

STEWART. I think you can make the case that Sinclair pulling the broadcast was itself a more political act than the show, especially since Sinclair executives are big contributors to the Bush campaign.

CORDDRY. That's exactly right, Jon, and tonight we honor those contributions in a special segment, Rob Corddry's "The Funding." (Roll video graphics that show the corporate logo or mug shot of each contributor with the corresponding amount underneath) Sinclair Broadcast Group \$22,400. David D. Smith (CEO) \$2,000. Robert Heyde (Television Division) \$2,000. Frederick Smith (Vice President) 100- 10-*cough* thous...I'm sorry, Jon, I could go on, but I ...

STEWART. That's all right, Rob, (pause) You take a minute and get yourself together. We'll be right back.

That's how it played out on first "fake news" day of May 2004. Stewart's guests that month included Ambassador Joe Wilson, author of a newly released book, *The Politics of Truth: Inside the Lies That Led to War and Betrayed My Wife's CIA Identity*. Bush-Cheney Campaign Manager Ken Mehlman also was a guest. So were Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz; Bill Krystol, editor of the conservative Weekly Standard; and basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Night after night, using file footage from mainstream media sources juxtaposed against each other to show inaccuracies, Stewart exposes misstatements and comments that appear ridiculous on face value and yet to many Americans go unchallenged by mainstream media.

His satirical ethos is simple: Use the same quotes and video mainstream media does, but show the audience a totally different story, one that belies the official White House line. It's as if Stewart tells his audience, sometimes lightly other times more harshly, "You aren't crazy. When you heard this and saw that and believed something outrageous was happening, it was. Here, let me show you."

The Anglo-American Tradition

Michel Foucault argues that modern societies create "regimes of truth" that are supported by power structures or truth-generating apparatuses such as educational institutions, professions, legal codes, etc.¹⁰¹ Foucault is more interested in the mechanisms that generate truth than he is in actual epistemological concepts, and he is somewhat agnostic on the good or evil aspects of power. He doesn't necessarily see power as a diabolic force, but he does argue that power energizes resistance. Satire is a form of resistance; in short, it is a way to speak truth to power. That is one key way it resembles journalism – or at least the role citizens in Western democracies expect journalism to play.

News reporting in its current form is a relatively new phenomenon. Reports that resemble news as we think of it today began to emerge in American newspapers during the Jacksonian era (the 1830s).¹⁰² The narrative genres of satire and political humor have had a much longer run.

¹⁰¹ Michel Foucault, *Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-7* (NY: Pantheon, 1980). 131.

¹⁰² Schudson, 4.

As noted earlier, satire is often defined in terms of literary forms common to the poetry of classical Rome, but satirical texts existed even before that. *The Satire of the Trades*, an Egyptian text from the second millennium B.C., poked fun at male children from elite families who complained they were tired of studying and made the case that their lot was far better than that of most men.¹⁰³ The Greek Aristophanes (446-386 B.C.), often called “the father of comedy,” was widely feared for his ability to ridicule. Plato cited his play *The Clouds* as slander that contributed to the trial and execution of Socrates.¹⁰⁴

In early medieval Europe, priests were allowed to challenge the great power of the Catholic Church at church-sanctioned events where they donned masks, engaged in irreverent status inversions of reigning potentates and mimicked sacred events. Over time, the church hierarchy saw the subversive nature of these festivals, and withdrew its support, causing the events to move into secular production.¹⁰⁵ Chaucer (1343-1400) used satire in the *Canterbury Tales*, notably in the General Prologue, where he introduces nuns, friars and other characters. Shakespeare (1564-1616), like Chaucer, is known as much more than a satirist, but he uses the technique freely in both comedic and historic works, such as *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *Henry IV*.

Western society’s focus on reason, questioning and criticism during the Enlightenment paved the way for a generation of satirical writers that included Swift,

¹⁰³ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. I, 1973, pp.184-193

¹⁰⁴ Plato, *The Apology*, trans. By Benjamin Jowett. 1871.
<[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Apology_\(Plato\)#4](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Apology_(Plato)#4)>

¹⁰⁵ John H. Townsen, *Clowns* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1976).

Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) and John Dryden (1631-1700). Defoe's *The True-Born*

Englishman was widely successful for drawing on the idea of Englishness to expose English xenophobia. Dryden's essay *Discourse Concerning Satire* is generally credited with establishing a commonly held literary definition of the technique. Dryden compares the craft of writing satire to the craft of drawing caricature. He argues that showing someone to be a fool without using the term directly requires the same type of artistic finesse as drawing a person's face with no more than appropriate attention to an extremely prominent feature.¹⁰⁶ He writes:

How easy it is it to call rogue and villain and that wittily. But how hard to make a man appear a fool, a blockhead, or a knave without using any of those opprobrious terms. To spare the grossness of the names, and to do the thing yet more severely is to draw a full face, and to make the nose and cheeks stand out, and yet not to employ any depth of shadowing.¹⁰⁷

Dryden uses more vivid imagery – the craft of butchery - to urge aspiring satirists to wield their tools carefully. “There is ... a vast difference between the slovenly butchering of a man and the fineness of a stroke that separates the head from the body and leaves it standing in its place.”¹⁰⁸

These social and intellectual traditions of the European Enlightenment were brought to America by our founding fathers. These founders were in intellectual terms rational men who relied on reason to create a socio-political system that based on free speech and unfettered right of citizens to assemble and to chronicle ideas and public

¹⁰⁶ Melody C. Johnson, on the Art of Satire, Bookstove, August, 21, 2007.
<<http://bookstove.com/poetry/on-the-art-of-satire/>>

¹⁰⁷ Abrams, 91.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

discussion in newspapers and pamphlets, the mass media of the day. Ben Franklin, whose many roles in the formation of early America included diplomat in both England and France, showed a keen awareness for cultural tolerance in political discourse in a number of his own satirical writings. In *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America* (1784), Franklin used satire skillfully to argue that colonists should respect Native American culture the same way they value their own ways of life.

The point of the early American press was politics, usually contentious rather than informative, and the free press that many leaders in the early Republic supported in theory sometimes responded with vicious satirical attacks on their patrons' ideas as well as their personal character. In 1798, the government passed The Sedition Act, which criminalized publication of "false, scandalous, and malicious writing" against the government or its officials. Jefferson denounced the measure, which expired in 1801, but the episode showed a tension that would mark the connections between politics, journalism and satire in American politics for the next two centuries.

Thomas Green Fessenden (1771-1837), a journalist and author, penned scores of satirical poems under the pseudonym Christopher Caustic.¹⁰⁹ They included *Democracy Unveiled*, a fierce attack on Jefferson and other political leaders. Fessenden began his book with verses that liken Jefferson to the Roman God Jupiter, Jupiter's son Hercules, and the Greek soldier-historian Xenophon. In one key passage, Fessenden refers to the preponderance that Jefferson's state, Virginia, obtained in the scale of popular representation - - a situation that enabled it to increase the privileges and immunities of

¹⁰⁹ Fessenden launched the *New England Farmer* in 1822 at Boston and edited it the rest of his life. He also wrote agricultural handbooks such as the widely used *Complete Farmer and Rural Economist* (1834). He was elected in 1836 to the Massachusetts General Court.

its black population and that draws heavily on Republican propriety. (The ten-dollar reference points to a pending tariff designed to inhibit importation of slaves).¹¹⁰

Great men can never lack supporters,
Who manufacture their own voters;
Besides, 'tis plain as yonder steeple;
They will be *fathers* to *the people*.

And 'tis a decent clever comical,
New mode of being economical,
For when a black is rais'd as follows,
It saves a duty of ten dollars.

And he's a wayward blockhead, who says
That making negroes or papooses,
Is not consistent with the plan,
Of Tom Pain's precious "Rights of Man."

In retrospect, it's not surprising that satire emerged during the Colonial period, that high-profile leaders and opinion-shapers used it successfully and that it found a considerable following. Like other times when the genre captured public attention, citizens were rethinking their orientation toward government and other powerful institutions. The same dynamic occurred when the Greeks and briefly the Romans experimented with democracy; as medieval power brokers imposed strict church authority to bring order to chaotic social conditions, then over time and fueled by scandal came to incrementally challenge that same authority; as Renaissance merchants formed a new social and economic class that reshaped feudal life; and as Enlightenment scholars invoked a scientific method against dogma and used reason to challenge longstanding political doctrines such as the Divine Right of Kings.

¹¹⁰ Christopher Caustic, L.L.D. *Democracy Unveiled*, second edition, (Boston: printed by David Carlisle for the author, 1805) 107.

Satire chronicled human events as a literary genre for thousands of years, while the social practice of journalism as we would recognize it today had not yet evolved. And while we look to newspapers as the primary source for America's social and political history, a close examination shows that satire has been present consistently in that medium – evident in the work of some great American masters.

Franklin's contribution to the canon of American humor began with the "tall tales" he told Europeans about the Colonies – such as whales that chased cod up Niagara Falls.¹¹¹ Like many satirists before and after him, Frankly was known by the cast of pseudonyms he created: Father Abraham, Polly Baker, Poor Richard and Mrs. Silence Dogood, a modest widow whose persona he assumed to anonymously publish columns in a colonial newspaper owned by his brother. As Dogood, he skewered powerful members of Boston society for being hypocritical and ill mannered. Dogood took an especially hard swipe at elite clergy and the hierarchy within the church as well as privileged gentlemen associated with Harvard University.

During the mid-1830s, Thomas Chadler Haliburton (1796-1865), a Canadian, created Sam Slick, central character in *The Saying and Doings of Samuel Slick, of Slickville*. Slick was a clockmaker and picaresque figure who traveled through Nova Scotia with a squire. Haliburton used wry Yankee observation and the technique of an author's narrative voice to chronicle their adventures. Twenty-two installments appeared in the *Novascotian* newspaper before they were published in 1836 as a book. Haliburton saw Nova Scotia as a community whose residents possessed fundamental

¹¹¹ Nancy Pogel and Paul P. Somers Jr., "Literary Humor," *Humor in America*, Lawrence Mintz ed, New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.

British values, but who had veered off-course culturally by clinging to an unrealistic standard of living in tough economic times. He used Slick's adventures to offer his ideal version of life in Nova Scotia – a place where people lived by the conservative principles of Edmund Burke tempered with frontier sensibility.¹¹²

The tradition of stand-up comedy in America can be traced to a class of nineteenth century frontier orators – many of them rough-hewn journalists – who crossed the Mississippi then returned and performed on what was known as “the lecture circuit.” These characters offered mass audiences unique and captivating stories laced with subtle social and political commentary. As social observers, and comic spokesman, these lectures ridiculed the beliefs and behaviors of their day and drew approving laughter from their audiences.¹¹³

By the end of the nineteenth century, publishing houses that were expanding in New York, Chicago and Boston had discovered the mass appeal of that narrative, and offered a new generation of social satirists and critics work as short story writers and novelists.¹¹⁴

Mark Twain, the pseudonym of Samuel Clemens, parlayed his experience and reputation as a journalist into a successful career on the nineteenth century lecture circuit, where bars and beer halls served as early incarnations of the stand-up comedy clubs that would dot America's urban landscape a century later. In October 1865, Twain

¹¹² Thomas Chadler Haliburton, Dictionary of Canadian Biography online. 1861-1870 Vol. IX. <<http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?Bioid=38597>>

¹¹³ Stephanie Kosiski Olson, “Stand-up Comedy” in *Humor in America*, Lawrence Mintz ed. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1988.

¹¹⁴ Mintz.

launched “Our Fellow Savages of the Sandwich Islands,” a sixteen-city lecture tour in California and Nevada designed to take advantage of a trip he made to Hawaii (then known as the Sandwich Islands).¹¹⁵ He delivered the lecture more than one hundred times, including a performance in London. Material for it came from twenty-five dispatches he filed for *The Sacramento Union*, which sent him on a five-month trip to the islands on the maiden voyage of the steamer Ajax.¹¹⁶

Twain later found a niche for his social and political satire in the postwar book publishing industry that was expanding in the north.¹¹⁷ In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, he uses the characters of an uneducated teenage boy and a runaway slave to show the moral dilemmas of slavery, which included ownership, property and theft. He also exposed the faulty logic corrupt leaders used to support their agendas and that others relied on simply to skirt them. A prime example is this justification for property theft offered by Finn, the picaro - - compounded by the irony of Jim, the slave, joining as a collaborator and a voice of reason:

Mornings before daylight I slipped into cornfields and borrowed a watermelon, or a mushmelon, or a punkin, or some new corn, or Things of that kind. Pap always said it warn't no harm to borrow things if you was meaning to pay them back some time; but the widow said it warn't anything but a soft name for stealing, and no decent body would do it. Jim said he reckoned the widow was partly right and pap was partly right; so the best way would be for us to pick out

¹¹⁵ Performances were given at: Sacramento, Calif.; Marysville, Calif.; Grass Valley, Calif.; Nevada City, Calif.; Red Dog, Calif.; You Bet, Calif.; Virginia City, Nevada; Carson City, Nevada; Washoe City, Nevada; Dayton, Nevada; Silver City, Nevada; Gold Hill, Nevada; San Francisco, Calif.; San Jose, Calif.; Petaluma, Calif.; and Oakland, Calif.

¹¹⁶ Steve Railton, “Mark Twain On Stage,” Index of Texts from *Mark Twain and His Times*, University of Virginia, E Texts. <<http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/about/txtindex.html>>

¹¹⁷ *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) presents colorful and humorous descriptions of people and places along the Mississippi River juxtaposed against the entrenched attitudes of the era that allowed slavery and widespread overt racism.

two or three things from the list and say we wouldn't borrow them any more – then he reckoned it wouldn't be no harm to borrow the others.¹¹⁸

At the dawn of the twentieth century, scholar Albert McLean notes, vaudeville, a uniquely American genre, rose to counter powerful and unprecedented forces in American culture. He argues that symbols and characters in many vaudeville acts expressed a need Americans of that time had to resist dystopian images of urbanization and the new industrialism, which were changing life in the country.¹¹⁹

Will Rogers (1879-1935) came to prominence during the Great Depression. Like Franklin and Twain before him, he combined the professional skills of journalist with those of an entertainer and social critic. Also like Franklin and Twin, he grabbed the attention of the nation during a time of great upheaval. Rogers was the last cracker-barrel figure of national significance, and his popularity came largely from the upbeat and sometimes sentimental exception he offered to more cynical satirists of his day. His answer to many problems was to draw answers from simpler times.¹²⁰

Rogers traveled around the world three times, made 71 movies (50 silent films and 21 "talkies").¹²¹ He wrote more than 4,000 nationally syndicated newspaper

¹¹⁸ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia. Chapter 12 p. 88. <<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new?id=Twa2Huc&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=12&division=div#f>>

¹¹⁹ Albert F. McLean Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975).

¹²⁰ Stephen Whitfield, Political Humor, in *Humor in America*, Lawrence Mintz, ed.

¹²¹ Rogers State University (2007-04-18). "RSU and Will Rogers Museum to Discuss Possible Merger". Press release. Archived from the original on 2007-11-07. Retrieved 2007-07-20

columns.¹²² By the mid-1930s, he had secured his place in history as the leading political wit of the Progressive Era, as well as the top-paid Hollywood movie star at the time. He is famous for saying:

When I die, my epitaph, or whatever you call those signs on gravestones, is going to read: "I joked about every prominent man of my time, but I never met a man I didn't like." I am so proud of that, I can hardly wait to die so it can be carved.¹²³

He also famously explained his success: "There's no trick to being a humorist when you have the whole government working for you."¹²⁴

A generation later, as America faced the Cold War of the 1950s and an underlying angst that would erupt in the 1960s, Mort Sahl (b. 1927) seized the ground vacated by Rogers - without the cowboy drag. Sahl typically appeared as a casually dressed graduate school dropout and peppered the Republican establishment with wry Jewish humor. Like Rogers, his jokes were largely based on current newspaper headlines. Indeed, he frequently came on stage holding a copy of the *New York Times*. He seemed to relish the role of political iconoclast. Reagan won because he ran against Jimmy Carter. If he ran unopposed he would have lost.¹²⁵ About Liberals and

¹²²Mark Schlachtenhaufen, (2007-05-31). "Will Rogers grandson carries on tradition of family service". *OkInsider.com*. Oklahoma Publishing Company. Archived from the original on 2007-09-28. Retrieved 2007-07-21.

¹²³ Paula McSpadden Love, 1930, in *The Will Rogers Book*, (1972) pp. 166–67.

¹²⁴ Laurence J. Peter, *Peter's Quotations: Ideas for Our Time* (1979) p. 524

¹²⁵ Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (new York: Pantheon.

Conservatives, he said, "Liberals feel unworthy of their possessions. Conservatives feel they deserve everything they've stolen."¹²⁶

Hunter S. Thompson (1937-2005) took irreverence for politics and traditional media to new heights in the mid-70s with *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*. He is largely credited for a form of political satire known as “gonzo journalism,” a style of subjective journalism in which the journalist often becomes a central character in the narrative.

Most of Thompson's best work was published in *Rolling Stone* magazine, beginning with "Freak Power in the Rockies," which described his 1970 bid for sheriff of Pitkin County, Colorado, on the “Freak Power” ticket. Thompson narrowly lost after a campaign that promoted decriminalization of drugs, tearing up the streets and turning them into grassy pedestrian malls, banning any building so tall as to obscure the view of the mountains, and renaming Aspen, Colorado “Fat City.”

Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72 is a collection of *Rolling Stone* articles he wrote while covering the campaigns of Richard Nixon and George McGovern. It focuses largely on the Democratic primaries and the breakdown of the party apparatus due to a split between the Democratic candidates. Thompson was a fierce critic of Nixon during and after his presidency. After Nixon's death in 1994, Thompson famously described him in *Rolling Stone* as a man who "could shake your hand and stab you in the back at the same time." He also wrote:

his casket [should] have been launched into one of those open-sewage canals that empty into the ocean just south of Los Angeles. He was a swine of a man

¹²⁶ Nachman.

and a jabbering dupe of a president. [He] was an evil man-evil in a way that only those who believe in the physical reality of the Devil can understand it."¹²⁷

This digest of the history of Anglo-American satire, shows how satirists rise to prominence during times of social and political unrest. Franklin's time was the beginning of a new nation. Twain's was the great post-Civil War westward expansion. Rogers rose during the gravest episode in our economic history. Sahl embodied the voice of repressed Cold War angst, and Thompson touched the imagination of the counter-culture that emerged from it a generation later.

Each of these men in their way, made the most of the medium of their era: the printing press: the emerging book industry, radio and cinema, television, and great national magazines. These are the characters and the traditions Stewart refers to when he claims he is not a new type of jouranlist, but a comedian following a long line of forefathers that have been around for centuries.

Stewart's Shtick

So, what is Stewart's shtick? How did it develop? And what connects him to and distinguishes him within the tradition he claims to follow?

The Daily Show is a thirty-minute mock newscast that airs four nights each week with selected segments available on the Comedy Central website. It is a hybrid of humorous commentary on public affairs and satire directed at the national media delivered by Stewart from a set designed to resemble a TV news studio. The program typically has 1.45 to 1.6 million viewers nightly, a high figure for cable television.¹²⁸ It

¹²⁷ Hunter S. Thompson, "He Was a Crook," *Rolling Stone*, 15 June 1994.

draws a younger and better-educated audience than the evening newscasts on the national networks. Writers meet each morning and review material that the research staff has collected from wire services, major newspapers, cable news programs and various websites.¹²⁹ They spend the morning writing “deadline pieces” based on breaking news and discussing headline material for the opening news segment. Stewart begins to review material around noon. The script is finalized by 3 p.m., and there’s a full rehearsal at 4:15 p.m. Writers have roughly an hour after that to make revisions. The show is taped at 6 p.m. in front of a studio audience.

The Daily Show typically tapes four episodes each week, Monday through Thursday, for forty-two weeks each year.¹³⁰ Episodes run at 11 PM Eastern/ 10 PM Central, the timeslot when network affiliates typically air local news and about a half hour before the network’s late-night comedy shows begin. Each episode also runs several times the following day, including a prime-time rerun at 8 PM Eastern/ 7 PM Central.

Episodes begin with an announcer saying: “From Comedy Central World News headquarters in New York, this is *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.” Stewart opens the show with a monologue built around news reports from mainstream media on the salient stories of the day.

¹²⁸ “Jon Stewart’s Nielsen Ratings Down 15 percent; Colbert’s Up 11 Percent,” *New York Magazine*. January 2008. Retrieved 2008-03-23.

¹²⁹ Cutbirth interview with Rob Kutner

¹³⁰ Ben Karlin, (2004-09-24). “Live Chat Transcript”. *Washington Post*. Retrieved 2008-07-06.

Unlike *Not the Nine O Clock News*, *Weekend Update* and other programs that pioneered political-media satire during the 1990s, *The Daily Show* doesn't use video with professional actors posing as politicians or news-makers. Its "reports" and the voice-over segments that Stewart gives draw on actual network news footage of media events, news conferences and other public appearances of public figures in the course of their actual real-life roles. Instead of fictional events, it deals with actual happenings already reported by corporate media. Stewart's specialty is showing how mainstream media often fail their viewers by reproducing official propaganda and not confronting specious statements or providing readily available context from easily assessable archives.

The opening segment is designed to resemble the opening segment of a network or local newscast. It's a great showcase for the talent Stewart developed doing stand-up. Stewart essentially delivers a stand-up comedic monologue on a fake news set with multi-media visual props. He presents a series of news clips and stories, punctuated with classic tools of stand-up comedy: voice inflection, sarcasm, the comedic pause and facial contortions to punctuate the "report." This is precisely what Americans are not used to seeing anchors do on the network and local news. Anchors in the mainstream media are trained to deliver the news dispassionately. (The few seconds that Walter Cronkite took to pause, remove his glasses and show some visible sadness during his report on President Kennedy's assassination are still considered a powerful iconic moment in broadcast news.)

Stewart's trademark move is rubbing his eyes with his fists. It's a symbolic gesture he uses to connect to his audience, typically after he runs a media clip that shows something outrageously hypocritical. He is emphasizing the message at the root of his satire: "When you saw that on the network news and didn't believe how the network handled it, or that it was actually happening, you weren't alone. You were right to think "What the Hell?" But I saw it too, and so did everyone else who watches this show, and that is why we are talking about it here tonight."

The second part of the show often includes exchanges between Stewart and his writers posing as news correspondents. They typically are introduced as a "senior" specialist on the subject at hand, a riff on the practice networks and local newscasts have of labeling correspondents experts on a particular topic or news beat. Sometimes these are bland titles like "senior political analyst"; other times they are absurdly specific, such as "senior child molestation expert."¹³¹ During these segments, Stewart plays the comedic role of "straight man" as the correspondents offer farcical takes on an aspect of a current news topic.

The show has recurring segments, another production format that is widely used by local and network news. A common one is "Mess O Potamia," which focuses on United States policy in the Middle East, especially Iraq. Another is the "Indecision" coverage Stewart used for news about the national elections in 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010. Stewart took the show to the cities hosting the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in 2000, 2004 and 2008. Daily Show "correspondents" also have

¹³¹ Steven Humphrey, 2006-06-08). "The Best Paintball Movie you'll See All Year!" *The Portland Mercury*, Retrieved 2008-07-09.

recurring segments, a format that is widely used in both local and network news.

Popular ones include “This Week in God” by Samantha Bee, “Back in Black” with Lewis Black and “Trendspotting” with Demetri Martin.

The show’s third segment generally features an interview Stewart conducts with someone widely recognized as newsworthy. Since Stewart became host, the show’s guest list shifted from entertainment celebrities toward non-fiction authors, political pundits and Washington politicians.¹³² The show initially had trouble booking high-profile politicians, but its coverage of the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns was so popular with an audience perceived as highly likely to vote that the show has moved into the prime tier of television appearances national candidates want to make. *Rolling Stone* described it in 2006 as “the hot destination for anyone who wants to sell books or seem hip, from presidential candidates to military dictators,”¹³³ and *Newsweek* dubbed it “the coolest pit stop on television.”¹³⁴ Obama’s appearance on Oct. 29, 2008, drew 3.6 million viewers, the largest audience for the show.¹³⁵ He reappeared two years later as the first sitting president to make the show.

As the show increasingly became a legitimate forum for newsmakers, Stewart was challenged to engage in more traditional and hard-hitting journalism. During the

¹³² Howard Kurtz, (2004-10-23). “The Campaign of a Comedian,” *The Washington Post*. Retrieved 2008-07-08.

¹³³ Dowd.

¹³⁴ Michiko Kakutani, (2008-08-15). “The Most Trusted Man in America, *New York Times*. Retrieved 2008-08-17.

¹³⁵ This beat the previous high of 3 million viewers, when the presidential candidate's wife Michelle Obama appeared on October 8, 2008. Holmwood, Leigh (2008-10-31). “Barack Obama gives Daily Show biggest ever audience.” London: The Guardian. Retrieved 2008-11-01.

2004 campaign, both Lizz Winstead, the show's co-creator, and Tucker Carlson, then host of *Crossfire*, criticized Stewart for being tough on politicians in his solo monologues then going easy on them when they appeared in person on the show.

Winstead argued:

When you have a Richard Perle or a Kissinger, if you give them a pass, then you become what you are satirizing. You have a war criminal sitting on your couch – to just let him be a war criminal sitting on your couch means you are having to respect some kind of boundary.¹³⁶

She modified that view last year, saying that since 2004, Stewart has done some of the hardest hitting interviews on TV. Stewart has said he doesn't believe he has any journalistic responsibility as an interviewer. He told Bill Moyers:

I think of myself as a comedian who has the pleasure of writing jokes about things I actually care about, and that is really it... I have great respect for people who are in the front lines and the trenches of trying to enact social change. I am far lazier than that. I am a tiny, neurotic man, standing in the back of the room throwing tomatoes at the chalkboard, and that's really it. And what we do is we come in in the morning and we go, "Did you see that thing last night? Ahhh!" and then we spend the next 8 or 9 hours trying to take this and make it into something funny.¹³⁷

True to its news parody format, *The Daily Show* often closes with what is known in the industry as "the toss," a short exchange with "our good friend, Stephen Colbert at The Colbert Report," which immediately follows. His segue to the closing credits is titled "Your moment of Zen," a random ideally humorous piece of video that was used in the news cast.

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¹³⁶ Kurt Anderson, "Taking Back the Dial" *Mother Jones*. 2004. Retrieved 2008-07-04.

¹³⁷ ["Transcript: Bill Moyers Interviews Jon Stewart"](#). *NOW with Bill Moyers*. 2003-07-11. Retrieved 2008-07-06.

Stewart spent much of the last decade puncturing propaganda floated by the Bush administration's spin machine. Since 2005, he and Colbert have offered an unprecedented back-to-back parody of daily newscasts with Stewart acting the part of droll network anchor and Colbert playing the role of bombastic cable host. A *Rolling Stone* interview titled "America's Anchors" described Stewart as "an intense Manhattan smarty-pants who has the style and air of a an perpetually slouching toward adulthood." Colbert was "a meticulous sports, a grown-up alter boy who still sprouts Latin."¹³⁸

Stewart's work showcases the techniques he honed stand-up comedy. It's built on glib asides, the comedic pause, puns and parody. Colbert's caricature reflects his training in improvisation. It's filled with high-energy, absurdity and ad-libbing. Says Stewart:

On our show, the last thing I think about is performing. It's all about the managing, editing and moving toward show time. Stephen is rendering a character in real time. Typically, he is improvising with people who don't know they are in an improv scene.¹³⁹

A common misperception people have is that the two men huddle each day and plot how to affect the national political debate.¹⁴⁰ Ben Karlin, former producer of *The Daily Show* and co-creator of *The Colbert Report*, insists they have a simple, single goal: to get a laugh. He ties Stewart's comedic drive to his childhood in Lawrence Township, New Jersey, where his parents divorced when Stewart was in grade school

¹³⁸ Maureen Dowd, "America's Anchors," *Rolling Stone*, 16 March 2006. p. 52-4, 56, 58, 139.

¹³⁹ Dowd

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

and he was bullied as a rare Jewish kid in his neighborhood. “Jon is driven by the forces of guilt and shame and fear of being on the outside that gives Jews their comic angst.”¹⁴¹

Stewart was 24 in 1986, when he arrived in New York to pursue a career in comedy. He was two years out of a small liberal arts college, where he’d earned a degree in psychology that landed him a job with the state of New Jersey performing puppet shows designed to sensitize schoolchildren to the disabled.¹⁴²

He worked in Manhattan as a bartender, waiter and caterer’s assistant while he honed his comedic skills with piecemeal work at some of the better-known stand-up comedy in Greenwich Village and on the Upper West Side. Several times, a big break seemed imminent only to vanish for various or unknown reasons.¹⁴³ He had the attention of some of the right people, but they just didn’t seem to know what to do with him. And he didn’t seem to know what to do with himself.

When Letterman left *Late Night* in 1993, Stewart was widely reported to be on “the short list” to replace him, but the job ultimately went to Conan O’Brien. Later that year, he again seemed poised for stardom when Paramount cancelled *The Arsenio Hall Show* and, with MTV, offered him an hour-long syndicated program titled *The Jon Stewart Show*. Guests were largely movie stars, rockers and supermodels served up

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Jill Gerston, “Television: MTV Has a Hit with Words by Jon Stewart,” *New York Times*, 13 March 1994. Sec. 2, P 34.

¹⁴³ Gerston.

“with an MTV spin,” but the show aired at 2 a.m. on most local stations, and it proved to be a ratings disaster.¹⁴⁴ It was cancelled in June 1995.

“I was unable to have a job,” Stewart told the *Washington Post* in a 2002 interview.¹⁴⁵

Stewart kept himself professionally occupied with piecemeal appearances on *The Larry Sanders Show*, filling in for Tom Snyder on the *The Late Late Show*, and writing his first book, *Naked Pictures of Famous People*, a collection of long-form essays.¹⁴⁶ The book includes a fictional interview of Adolph Hitler by Larry King. In the parody, Hitler somehow escaped his legendary death in the Berlin bunker and lives modestly a regretful senior citizen who begins his days with a trip to a suburban shopping center for an Orange Julius.

Stewart arrived at *The Daily Show* at an awkward time - - when the role of the host and the tone of the show were under intense scrutiny. His predecessor, Craig Kilborn, set-off a chain of events that threatened the show’s viability in a 1997 interview with *Esquire* when he made a grotesquely sexist remark about its high-profile co-creator Lizz Winstead.¹⁴⁷ Winstead immediately left the show.¹⁴⁸ Kilborn claimed the

¹⁴⁴ Daily Datebook, “MTV Enters the Talk Show Fray” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 11, 1993. F1.

¹⁴⁵ David Segal, “The Seriously Funny Jon Stewart; Cable’s ‘Daily Show’ host delivers satire with substance,” *Washington Post*. 2 May 2002. C 01.

¹⁴⁶ Segal.

¹⁴⁷ Kilborn was asked something to the effect of how he got along with Winstead. He responded with: “To be honest, Lizz does find me very attractive. If I wanted her to blow me she would.”

¹⁴⁸ Michael Colton, (1999-04-04). “Lizz Winstead Returns ... and So Does Marv.” *The New York Observer*. Retrieved 2011-03-11.

remarks were in jest (in keeping with the irreverent tone of the show) and publicly apologized. Nonetheless, he was suspended and resigned soon after. Stewart was named host in January 1999.

Despite the volatile atmosphere, *The Daily Show* was well-established when Stewart arrived. *TV Guide* already had named it “best late-night comedy,” and Kilborn had been nominated for a Cable Ace award for best host. But the show wasn’t exclusively about politics. Kilborn’s style was to mock politics one minute and then to segue into something farcical such as his own ability to disco dance or a discussion about which take-out food is better the next day: pizza or Chinese. The challenge for Stewart was whether to continue that format or change it to suit his own style.

Stewart experimented for a year then found his voice during the contentious 2000 presidential campaign, especially with the absurd news reports of the bizarre yet historic Florida recount. He decided to drop the random skits and variety content and to focus exclusively on political humor - and to do it in a way that used *The Daily Show* newscast format that already was in place to satirize the mainstream media. It struck an instant cord. Winstead recalls:

People wanted it. It came at the right time when MSNBC was sort of launching and the pressure of 24-hour news (was building). And with the pressure of 24-hour news came the pressure of filling those days. And that coupled with competing ratings - and the news isn’t just competing with other news; it’s competing with *Friends* and whatever other show is around. So, not only were people in the media afraid to do political satire, but the genre itself became ripe to satirize. A year later I don’t think (Stewart’s version of) *The Daily Show* would have been successful. I think it was just the right time.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Joe Cutbirth interview with Lizz Winstead, 2004.

Until that point, no one except Bill Maher had found a way to sustain a full program of political humor on television on a nightly basis. Maher's hit show, *Politically Incorrect* (1993-2002), wasn't media satire. It was a straight-up talk show. What made it different was that instead of journalists and pundits, it was built around an unpredictable mix of television personalities, comedians and political activists engaging in a conversation refereed by him. For example, the first episode featured comedian Jerry Seinfeld, Robin Quivers (Howard Stern's sidekick), Republican Party strategist Ed Rollins, and comedian Larry Miller. Frequent guests included Dave Matthews, Arianna Huffington, Michael McKean, Ann Coulter, Carrot Top, and Christine O'Donnell. Maher described the program as "*The McLaughlin Group* on acid."¹⁵⁰

The idea behind *Politically Incorrect* was truth in public discourse. Maher believed that political correctness was an insult to honest dialog, and that political incorrectness was a way to cut through that public masquerade.¹⁵¹ Discussing the title of the program he periodically had to explain, Maher noted:

Politically incorrect means not flinching from saying what actually is, as opposed to stating what should be and then castigating anyone who points out the discrepancy, which is what the politically correct do. They purposefully blur the line between aspiration and reality. Like in Orwell, an opinion that is "official" gets stated so much we forget what is actually true.¹⁵²

Where Maher broke ground – and it was a seismic shift – was placing people like Dave Matthews or Carrot Top literally next to political elites like Ed Rollins and

¹⁵⁰ Bill Carter, (1994-02-27). "TELEVISION; Lots of Political Humor, and No Morton Kondracke". *New York Times* <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9402E7D9103BF934A15751C0A962958260&n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/People/M/Maher,%20Bill>. Retrieved 2008-01-17.>

¹⁵¹ Jones, 101.

¹⁵² Bill Maher, "Babes and the Beltway," *Playboy* 46, January 1999, 161.

directing the conversation. Jones calls it “new political television,” a format that crossed traditional protocols of public affairs programming on PBS and the Sunday morning network shows. Instead of elite journalists interviewing government officials, Maher used well-known celebrities as surrogates for so-called “average citizens,” and encouraged them to speak candidly on the topics that were being discussed on the evening news and on traditional public affairs programs.

Maher’s comedy during the *Politically Incorrect* era often was more sympathetic to elected officials than to citizens. His frustration focuses more on an electorate that maintains an idealistic perception of what politicians should be, but knows quite well that those demands are not realistic.¹⁵³ Says Maher, “In general, I’m supportive of politicians. We ask them to do the impossible, because we speak out of both sides of our mouths. When they tell us the truth, we reject them. When they don’t, we lambaste them for lying.”¹⁵⁴

In contrast, Stewart essentially embraced the cause of disillusioned and disaffected citizens. Like *Politically Incorrect*, *The Daily Show* is premised on truth in public discourse. Where Stewart broke ground was the extent to which he brought the mainstream media under scrutiny. The initial take on Stewart – and the one consistently used by most Republicans and conservatives – is that he is a liberal who uses comedy to attack conservative politicians.

¹⁵³ Jones 102.

¹⁵⁴ Sheff, *Playboy* Interview, 51ff. in Jones *Entertaining Politics*.

Stewart clearly is liberal, but his liberalism is more in the tradition of the populist movement and as a supporter of rapid social change than as a partisan Democrat or supporter of the Democratic National Committee.

A more nuanced take on Stewart – one he would more likely agree with – is that he is a satirist who operates in the satirical tradition of challenging the status quo. During the first decade of his show, the status quo was the Bush Administration, and Stewart clearly was outraged by the propaganda the administration consistently put forward. He argued:

This administration more than any other I've ever seen, is gaslighting us! Literally, it's raining on us, it's cloudy and they go, "And on this sunny day" – No, it's not sunny. And they say "Uh – this sunny day," and then you look at the backdrop they've got and it says *sunny*, and they say, "See sunny?" It's just a lie. They just don't acknowledge it. And by not acknowledging it, what they say becomes true.¹⁵⁵

Stewart consistently argues that his show is neither a journalistic organization, which should attempt to treat opposing political views fairly, nor a liberal organization that would operate with a partisan ideological agenda. He says Republicans tend to provide more comedic fodder because "I think we consider those with power and influence targets and those without it, not."¹⁵⁶ In 2005, Colbert, who was still working on *The Daily Show*, noted:

We are liberal, but Jon's very respectful of the Republican guests, and, listen, if liberals were in power it would be easier to attack them, but Republicans have the executive, legislative and judicial branches, so making fun of Democrats is like kicking a child, so it's just not worth

¹⁵⁵ Simon Houpt, "The World according to Stewart," *The Globe and Mail*, 3 October 2001.

¹⁵⁶ Younge, Gary (2005-10-01). "Such A Tease". *Guardian.co.uk* (London). Retrieved 2007-04-10.

it.”¹⁵⁷

Perhaps the show’s most consistent critic has been conservative Fox Network anchor Bill O’Reilly. In 2004, as *The Daily Show* gained notoriety with the Pew studies that showed young people looking to Stewart for political information, O’Reilly publicly insulted Stewart’s audience and questioned the civic worth of his show. "You know what's really frightening?" O'Reilly said to Stewart during a guest appearance on *The O'Reilly Factor*. "You actually have an influence on this presidential election. That is scary, but it's true. You've got stoned slackers watching your dopey show every night and they can vote."¹⁵⁸

Comedy Central responded by pointing to a study by the University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey that found Daily Show viewers were more likely to answer questions about politics correctly than those who don't watch it. They also released demographics by Nielsen Media research to directly compare Stewart’s viewers to O’Reilly’s.¹⁵⁹ According to Nielsen:

- The median age of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* 11:00 p.m. (premiere) airing is 35, while its median income is \$67,000. The median age of *The O’Reilly Factor* 8:00 p.m. (premiere) airing is 63, while its median income is \$54,000.

¹⁵⁷ Berkowitz, Elana and Schiller, Amy. "Five Minutes With: Stephen Colbert". *CampusProgress.org*. Retrieved 2007-06-06.

¹⁵⁸ Dan Collins, "Bill O'Reilly v. Jon Stewart" *CBS News*. 28 Sept. 2008. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/28/entertainment/main646002.shtml>

¹⁵⁹ "O'Reilly again attacked *Daily Show* viewers as being 'stoned' 'dopey college kids' " *Media Matters*, 16 June 2006.

- Viewers of *The Daily Show* are 78% more likely than the average adult to have four or more years of college education. Viewers of *The O'Reilly Factor* are only 24% more likely than the average adult to have four or more years of college education.
- Viewers of *The Daily Show* are 42% more likely than the average adult to have a household income of \$75,000+. Viewers of *The O'Reilly Factor* are only 6% more likely the average adult to have a household income of \$75,000+.
- Viewers of *The Daily Show* are 26% more likely than the average adult to have a household income of \$100,000+. Viewers of *The O'Reilly Factor* are only 11% more likely than the average adult to have a household income of \$100,000+.
- Viewers of *The Daily Show* are 74% more likely than the average adult to have a household income of \$75,000+ and an occupation of "professional, owner or manager." Viewers of *The O'Reilly Factor* are 15% less likely than the average adult to have a household income of \$75,000+ and an occupation of "professional, owner or manager."
- Viewers of *The Daily Show* are 37% more likely than the average adult to be in a "white collar" profession. Viewers of *The O'Reilly Factor* are 15% less likely the average adult to be in a "white collar" profession.

Stewart and O'Reilly routinely trade barbs, yet they maintain a cordial enough professional relationship to occasionally appear on each other's shows. O'Reilly repeated the audience bashing in 2006, when he called Stewart's audience "dopey college kids." Last year, he took direct aim at Stewart saying he effectively has emerged

as “the point man for the left wing media” in America. “With the decline of *The New York Times* and other liberal newspapers, he is now the face of the left on television.”¹⁶⁰

Stewart has consistently denied charges of that type. In an interview on *The O'Reilly Factor* in 2008, he said the goal of his show is “schnicks and giggles.” He added, “The same weakness that drove me into comedy also informs my show,” referring to how uncomfortable he is talking without hearing an audience laugh.” There are plenty of instances of Stewart criticizing Democrats and people who claim to be politically liberal. He told Larry King on the eve of the 2006 midterm election, “I honestly don’t feel that the Democrats make an impact. They have forty-nine percent of the vote and three percent of the power. At a certain point you go ‘Guys, pick up your game.’”¹⁶¹ He’s also criticized Democrats for failing to stand effectively against the war in Iraq, describing them in 2007 as “incompetent” and “unable to locate their asses even when presented with two-hands and a special ass map.”¹⁶²

Stewart has been a consistent critic of Fox News. That criticism, however, tends to address the network’s journalistic practices rather than its political philosophy: the claim that the network is “fair and balanced” vis a vis its actual product. In 2009, for example, Stewart publicly embarrassed the network for using footage from a previous Tea Party rally for a more recent one, a decision that made the later rally appear larger

¹⁶⁰ “O'Reilly: 'I believe Jon Stewart has now emerged as the point man for the left-wing media in America' “ *Media Matters* 21 April 2010

¹⁶¹ Larry King, “Larry King Live Transcript: Interview With Jon Stewart”. *CNN*. 27 Feb. 2006. Retrieved 2008-07-12.

¹⁶² Jon Stewart, “Withdrawal Method,” *The Daily Show* 13 March 2007. Retrieved 2008-08-22.

than it was.¹⁶³ Sean Hannity, anchor of that program, publicly apologized the following night. Last year, Stewart seemed to step-up his criticism of the network. In the first quarter of 2010 alone, *The Daily Show* had 24 segments criticizing Fox News coverage. The lower-rated CNN was the subject of only five *Daily Show* segments during that time.¹⁶⁴

Karlin, the former executive producer, acknowledged that Stewart's values drive the show's content, but he says the overriding value isn't liberal politics but simply what Stewart finds ironic and therefore funny. "If you have a legitimately funny joke in support of the notion that gay people are an affront to God, we'll put that motherfucker on."¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Sharon Hong, "Video Fix: Jon Stewart catches Fox News using wrong footage," *Seattle PI*, 11 Nov. 2009.

¹⁶⁴ Brian Stelter, "Jon Stewart's Punching Bag, Fox News," *New York Times* 23 April 2010.

¹⁶⁵ "The Ben Karlin Interview: Just Under Twenty Questions". Zulkey.com, Diary.

CHAPTER 4

THE END OF OMNISCIENCE

Dan Rather's nightly competition stood beside him – physically and professionally – in the fall of 2004 as the reputation he built during more than thirty years unraveled. The venerable face of the CBS Evening News was under fierce attack from political partisans and a new generation of political journalists known as “bloggers” over the accuracy of a story he ran on Bush's National Guard service. Tom Brokaw, anchor of the NBC Nightly News, and Peter Jennings, anchor of ABC World News Tonight, commented publicly on the situation at an appearance with Rather sponsored by *The New Yorker* magazine.¹⁶⁶

Brokaw called Internet postings critical of Rather a “political jihad.” Jennings insisted that it was inappropriate to “judge a man by one event in his career.” Both men acknowledged that mistakes had been made, but they also freely shared their feelings about the Internet postings and the sharp attacks from right-wing pundits on cable news shows that were keeping the story alive. Jennings said, “I think the attack on CBS is an attack on mainstream media, an attack on the so-called liberal media.” Brokaw added, “It is certainly an attempt to demonize CBS News, and it goes well beyond any factual information a lot of them has, the kind of demagoguery that is unleashed out there.”

¹⁶⁶ Marguerite Reardon, “Network TV Bigwigs Rail Against Bloggers,” CNet News.com. 4 Oct. 2004 <http://news.com.com/2102-1025_3-35395911.html?tag=st.util.print>.

The remarks came at an historical convergence of sorts – a time when for different reasons the three giants of broadcast network news were in the final months of a combined 60 years as anchors for their respective shows.¹⁶⁷ It also was a time when ratings for the network evening news were falling rapidly and the credibility of American journalism as defined by the ethos of objectivity had ebbed to the lowest point since the early 1970s, when Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein unmasked the grave abuses involved in the Watergate scandal.

The audience for the network news fell thirty-four percent between 1993 and 2005.¹⁶⁸ A Gallup Poll taken one month before the anchors made their remarks supporting Rather found that only 44 percent of Americans were confident that the national media were able to report news stories accurately and fairly. The finding reflected the lowest level of confidence in the media since Gallup first asked the question in 1972.¹⁶⁹

A few months later, as Bush prepared to take the oath of office for his second term, Howard Fineman of *Newsweek* penned a virtual obituary for what came to be called “the mainstream media.” For Fineman and others, the Rather scandal was the final nail in its coffin. He wrote:

¹⁶⁷ Rather was anchor of the *CBS Evening News* 1981-2005. Jennings was anchor of *ABC World News Tonight* 1983-2005, and Brokaw was anchor of *NBC Nightly News* 1983-2004.

¹⁶⁸ Peter Johnson, “Anchors may not be only change in TV news,” *USA Today*, 26 April 2005. <http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2005-04-26-network-news_x.htm>.

¹⁶⁹ Mark Gillespie, “Media credibility reaches lowest point in three decades,” 23 Sept. 2004. <<http://www.galluppoll.com/content/?CI=13132>>

A political party is dying before our eyes — and I don't mean the Democrats. I'm talking about the "mainstream media," which is being destroyed by the opposition (or worse, the casual disdain) of George Bush's Republican Party; by competition from other news outlets (led by the Internet and Fox's canny Roger Ailes); and by its own fraying journalistic standards. At the height of its power, the AMMP (the American Mainstream Media Party) helped validate the civil rights movement, end a war and oust a power-mad president. But all that is ancient history.¹⁷⁰

Peggy Noonan, political columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, agreed that the Rather scandal signaled a sea change in the course of American political reporting, but she challenged Fineman's assertion that "George Bush's Republican Party" was the chief catalyst for its collapse. Instead, she offered a much longer cast of characters that featured a blend of conservative voices and new technologies that emerged during the 1980s. It included Rush Limbaugh, cable news, a cadre of maverick journalists who gained prominence during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, the Internet, talk radio, Fox News and *The Washington Times*. She wrote:

The Ratergate report is a watershed event in American journalism not because it changes things on its own, but because it makes unavoidably clear a change that has already occurred. And that is that the mainstream media's monopoly on information is over. That is, the monopoly enjoyed by three big networks, a half-dozen big newspapers and a handful of weekly magazines from roughly 1950 to 2000 is done and gone, and something else is taking its place. That would be a media cacophony. But a cacophony in which the truth has a greater chance of making itself clearly head.¹⁷¹

Fineman, who began his career as a political reporter during the Watergate era, and Noonan, a former Reagan speechwriter, tie their conclusions to ad hoc events in

¹⁷⁰ Howard Fineman, "'Mainstream Media Party' is over," *MSNBC.com*, 13 Jan. 2005 <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6813945/print/1/displaymode/1098/>>.

¹⁷¹ Peggy Noonan, "MSM Requiem," *OpinionJournal.com*, 13 Jan. 2005 <<http://www.opinionjournal.com/forms/priontTHJis.html?id=110006150>>.

recent time. But Michael Schudson offers a broader interpretation of the ebb and flow of objective journalism in twentieth century America. He argues that the practice of objective journalism emerged in the decades immediately after World War I in the form of a cultural current spawned by grave social conditions. It was a time, he writes, when “corporations, not individuals, controlled supply and demand; machines not voters controlled elections and powerful publisher and the need for mass entertainment – not the pursuit of truth – governed the press.”¹⁷²

Schudson argues that journalists of that era latched onto objectivity as a means to escape their own deep convictions of doubt and drift. He writes:

Their experience of propaganda during the war and public relations thereafter convinced them that the world they reported was one that interested parties had constructed for them to report.¹⁷³

The decline of objectivity, in Schudson’s view, began at least two generations earlier, during the 1960s, when commonly accepted ideas of professionalism were being challenged. Among them was the notion of objective journalism, which the generation of Americans who fought in World War II had come to view as an antidote to bias. Instead, young Americans were beginning to see that model as the most insidious bias of all. In their view, it reinforced institutions whose legitimacy they questioned, hypocritically pretended not to have opinions and refused to acknowledge that some stories did have right and wrong sides.

¹⁷² Schudson, 158.

¹⁷³ Schudson, 6.

The conflict between an older generation defending the status quo and a younger generation attacking it is an old story, but Schudson notes that during the 1960s it was playing out again: between the generation that fought totalitarianism in Europe and the one born to the affluence of the Cold War; between those hesitant to question America's involvement in an Asian civil war and those angry about it; and between institutional responsibilities of venerable newspapers and network television stations and a new breed of reporters eager to challenge them. He writes:

Young reporters not only called for a more active journalism, a participant journalism skeptical of official accounts of public affairs; they also claimed pointedly that journalism had long been too participant. 'Straight News' was not only drab and constricting it was in itself a form of participation, a complicity with official sources whose most alarming feature was that it so self-righteously claimed to be above partisan or political considerations.¹⁷⁴

Among the writers to emerge during that period was Joan Didion, whose work in the following decades earned her high regard as an observer of American politics and culture, and established her reputation for a distinctive style that mixes personal reflection and social analysis.¹⁷⁵ Didion was well-established by 1988, when she angered the political and journalistic establishments with her reporting on the presidential campaign between George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis.

The contest was the first presidential election in two decades without an incumbent on the ballot, and many Americans, including most reporters assigned to

¹⁷⁴ Schudson, 162.

¹⁷⁵ As a result, she often is grouped with the cadre of journalists such as Tom Wolfe and Hunter Thompson, known for the New Journalism that emerged during the era to counter the objective voice of institutional media; however, any official or direct link to Wolfe, Thompson and that group is tenuous.

cover it, began with high hopes for a spirited debate that would renew public interest in presidential politics and bring a new generation of Americans into the process. By the time it was over, the opposite had occurred. To borrow a phrase coined by Morton Grodzins, in the history of objective journalism and political reporting, Didion's observations identify 1988 as "a tipping point."

Didion's report for the *New York Review of Books*, "Insider Baseball," described how political professionals were managing the coverage so tightly that the public was receiving little more than an endless barrage of photo-ops and pseudo-events. The key image in her work came from a campaign stop in which Dukakis, for the benefit of television crews, threw a baseball back and forth with a press aide on an airport tarmac. Seasoned reporters traveling with the campaign dutifully reported the event as the news – via photo – of the day. Didion wrote about the reporters "all of whom believed it to be a setup and yet most of whom believed that only an outsider, someone too 'naive' to know the rules of the game, would so describe it."¹⁷⁶

In short, Didion exposed the fact that the political narrative of modern campaigns was drawn from these types of tacit arrangements – some of them minor daily photo-ops, others major events, such as the national conventions – offered by the campaigns and taken by reporters covering them who saw their jobs as providing citizens a storyline about "the process" rather than the positions candidates were taking on issues that actually affected citizens' lives. Her opening paragraph employs the chief conventions of New Journalism – the author as actor in the narrative, use of scenes,

¹⁷⁶ Didion, 37.

conversational speech rather than direct quotations, etc... - and sets the tone for an

engaging description of the modern electorate. She writes:

It occurred to me during the summer of 1988 in California and Atlanta and New Orleans in the course of watching first the California primary and then the Democratic and Republican national conventions that it had no been by accident that the people with whom I had preferred to spend time in high school had, on the whole, hung out in gas stations... They had knocked-up girls, and married them, had begun what they called the first night of the rest of their lives with a midnight drive to Carson City and a five-dollar ceremony performed by a justice of the Peace still in his pajamas...

They paid their bills or did not pay their bills, made down payments on tract houses, led lives on that social and economic edge referred to in Washington, among those whose preferred locus is Washington, as out there. They were never destined to be, in other words, communicants in what we have come to call, when we want to indicate the traditional ways in which power is exchanged and the status quo maintained in the United States, "the process."¹⁷⁷

A few graphs later, Didion shifts her descriptive eye from the citizens she believes are being left out of "the process" to the gatekeepers she believes have hijacked it. She writes:

When we talk about the process, then, we are talking increasingly not about "the democratic process," or the general mechanism affording the citizens of a state a voice in its affairs, but the reverse: a mechanism seen as so specialized that access to it is correctly limited to its own professionals, to those who manage policy and those who report on it, to those who run the polls and those who quote them, to those who ask and those who answer the questions on the Sunday shows, to the media consultants, to the columnists to the issues advisers to those who give off-the-record breakfasts and those who attend them; to that handful of insiders who invent year-in-and-year-out the narrative of pubic life.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Didion, 19.

¹⁷⁸ Didion ,22.

What struck Didion most about one most vividly about the campaign was its remoteness from “the real life” of the country and the people who were living it.¹⁷⁹ A few months later, the results bore her out. When polls closed on Election Day, barely 50 percent of the eligible population had bothered to vote. It was the lowest percentage since 1924.¹⁸⁰

Public Journalism

Almost immediately after the election, calls for reform came from some of the more respected names in the journalism industry. Notable among them was *Washington Post* political columnist David Broder, known widely among his peers as “the dean of Washington political reporters.” Speaking at a lecture sponsored by *The (Riverside, Calif.) Press-Enterprise*, he made a shocking confession: that for thirty years “we reported everything that was happening in American politics – except that it was collapsing.”¹⁸¹

About the same time, a group of academics, bolstered by significant funding from citizen-interest groups, began calling for a new journalistic ethos, which came to be known as “public (or civic) journalism.” Jay Rosen of New York University, an early leader in the public journalism movement, declared:

public journalists want public life to work. In order to make it work they are willing

¹⁷⁹ Didion, 22.

¹⁸⁰ John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project*, University of California Santa Barbara, est. 1999
<<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/turnout.php>>.

¹⁸¹ Bill Woo, “Public Journalism and the Tradition of Detachment,” University of California at Riverside and The Riverside Press-Enterprise Lecture, 22 Sept. 1995.

to declare an end to their neutrality on certain questions – for example: whether people participate, whether a genuine debate takes place when needed, whether a community comes to grips with its problems.¹⁸²

Public journalism had some high-powered detractors, including Leonard Downie, editor of *The Washington Post*; Max Frankel, a former editor of *The New York Times*; and Anthony Marro, editor of *Newsday*. *The Columbia Journalism Review* noted that most opponents tended to see it as the latest substitute for a healthy editorial budget and solid journalistic instincts, “gobbledygook at best, danger at our worst.”¹⁸³

Studies, however, showed that Broder, Rosen and others had tapped into something - at least the idea that something in the relationship between political reporters and their audiences had gone terribly wrong. A survey of people’s confidence in major institutions by Yankelovich Associates found confidence in TV news and newspapers was plummeting – from 55 to 25 percent for TV and from 51 to 20 percent for newspapers from 1988 to 1993. By 1994, 71 percent of Americans told a *Times Mirror* survey that media “stand in the way of America solving its problems.”¹⁸⁴

Public journalism mushroomed in this climate. Between 1992 and 1995, the number of newsrooms in America experimenting with it in one form or another rose from about 5 to 171.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Mike Hoyt, “Are You Now, or Will You Ever Be, a Civic Journalist?” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Sept./ Oct. 1995.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

Clearly, the social and cultural expectations of mainstream media as they had existed for decades were changing. But political factors and new technologies were lining up with them to create a climate for change that resembled a perfect storm in political journalism as America approached the twenty-first century.

Deregulation

During the 1980s, the Reagan Administration's philosophy of deregulation led to the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine and a massive reshuffling of the laws that governed the operation of cable television. The Fairness Doctrine had been enforced since 1934, when the Federal Communications Act created the Federal Communications Commission. It required television and radio stations to present controversial issues of public importance in what could be deemed as an honest, equal and balanced manner. For most of the twentieth century, rightly or wrongly, it framed the idea of fairness and objectivity in broadcast journalism - - though its critics increasingly charged that it led to the suppression of controversial news out of fear that the "other side" would demand time to present their ideas.

Reagan administration officials argued that the requirement to provide equal time for different viewpoints had come to create an undue burden on station managers who, as a result, were avoiding political discussion and programming altogether. In short, they claimed the rule was having the opposite of its intended effect, and in August 1987 they abolished it. In an interview after he left office, FCC chairman Mark Fowler, who spearheaded the drive to kill the doctrine, called its supporters "enemies of the free press." He told the Associated Press "...there's nothing wrong with fairness, but

when the government steps into the newsroom, second-guessing the editor, ordering the editor to publish things; that is more dangerous to a free society."¹⁸⁶

As the FCC was deregulating broadcasting, Congress was reshaping the landscape of cable television. The Cable Communications Policy Act, which took effect on January 1, 1987, rescinded the right of municipalities and states to regulate cable television. Until then, most cable channels were governed by cities they served (only eleven states had been involved in regulating the industry.)¹⁸⁷ The FCC joined congressional efforts by dropping the so-called “must carry” rule, which required cable operators to offer content from any on-the-air station in its viewing area. Further deregulation in 1992 and 1996 allowed telephone companies to enter the cable business within their local territories and vice versa.

So, even before the Internet gained widespread use outside the academic and defense industries, these cultural political and technological forces were reshaping the mass media marketplace. Most of the factors Noonan identified in her column for *The Wall Street Journal* at the end of the 2004 campaign – the ones she credits with changing the media landscape by the beginning of the twenty-first century – were taking shape in the late 1980s and 1990s. Chief among them was talk radio, whose practitioners and advocates claim it emerged and gained rapid popularity with conservatives who were eager to find a alternative to liberal bias they believed was

¹⁸⁶ Merrill Hartson, “Former FCC Head Applauds Reagan’s Fairness-Doctrine Decision,” *The Associated Press*, 21 June 1987.

¹⁸⁷ Bob McHugh, “Cable Deregulation Goes Into Effect; Industry Analysts Predict Higher Prices, Increased Service.” *The Associated Press*, 1 Jan. 1987.

inherent in most large newspapers and the three longtime broadcast networks. And the biggest name in political talk radio, unquestionably, was Rush Limbaugh.

In 1988, a year after the FCC repealed the Fairness Doctrine, WABC-AM lured Limbaugh from Sacramento to Manhattan. Two years later, his broadcasts were reaching an estimated 1.3 million listeners a day and earning him roughly \$500,000 a year.¹⁸⁸ During the 2004 campaign, the number spiked to 14 million listeners each week on more than 600 stations that carried his syndicated broadcast.¹⁸⁹ Tony Blankley of *The Washington Times*, a former press secretary to U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich, spoke passionately during an interview with Public Broadcasting Service about the political importance of talk radio to the conservative movement and Limbaugh's impact on American politics:

Starting in 1994, with the Republican election of Congress, I think Limbaugh made the difference in electing the Republican majority. In the following three elections, he made the difference in holding the majority. And in 2000 in the presidential race in Florida, he was the difference between Gore and Bush winning Florida and thus the presidency.¹⁹⁰

By the mid-1990s, the Internet was moving into commercial and personal use thanks largely to the creation of the World Wide Web. Eventually, America Online's decision in December 1996 to change its fee for Internet access from an hourly rate to low monthly charge for unlimited access sparked a boon in the number of Web sites and

¹⁸⁸ Lewis Grossberger, "The Rush Hours," *New York Times*, 16 Dec. 1990,

¹⁸⁹ Terrence Smith, "The Right Talk," *PBS Online NewsHour* 13 Oct. 2003.
<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/july-dec03/righttalkradio_10-13.html>

¹⁹⁰ Smith.

created a venue for an entirely new type of reporter: the cyber journalist. As Internet pioneer Matt Drudge told the National Press Club during the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, “We have entered an era vibrating with the din of small voices. Every citizen can be a reporter, (who) can take on the powers that be...And you would be surprised what the ordinary guy knows.”¹⁹¹

The Late-Night Effect

While Bill Clinton and Al Gore were sweeping the country in 1992 – energizing a coalition of young Americans, New Democrats and fiery liberals eager to claim a place in national politics after twelve years of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush – Stewart was sputtering around the Manhattan comedy circuit trying to parlay a short-lived career on “Short Attention Span Theatre” into something – anything – permanent.

The night Clinton and Gore laughed and danced with Hillary and Tipper on the back porch of the Arkansas governor’s mansion as president- and vice president-elect – Fleetwood Mac’s “Don’t Stop Thinking About Tomorrow” blaring for hundreds of cheering fans – Stewart stepped onto a bare MTV production set and introduced an amateurish skit on “You Wrote It, You Watch It,” another temporary gig at a struggling cable network.

It would be eight more years before fate would throw Stewart and what was left of the Clinton-Gore team together in the wake of Gore’s 2000 presidential campaign and the Florida recount. Meanwhile, Jay Leno, David Letterman and the cast of *Saturday Night Live* would capitalize on comedic gold they mined from news accounts

¹⁹¹ Matt Drudge, “Anyone with a Modem Can Report on the World,” address to the National Press Club, June 1998.

of the new first family, the president's youthfully hip staffers and the FOBs (Friends of Bill) who were flocking to the nation's capital to be part of this new administration.

November 4, 1992, the day the first baby boomer was elected president, marked the end of an old political order.¹⁹² That was clear. What also was happening – but was much less clear – was that along with it, an old media order that relied more on the dinner hour than bedtime to reach its audience also was slipping away.

Politics is nothing new to late-night television. It was there in the fifties and sixties with Jack Paar's trip to Berlin and Dick Cavett's confrontation with Lester Maddox. It grew in the seventies and eighties as Johnny Carson poked fun at Richard Nixon and Tom Snyder chatted with Gloria Steinem and Charles Manson. By the turn of the century, a second generation of Americans was growing comfortable with televised bedtime stories that reflected the political currents of the day – brought to them in Jay Leno's monologues and David Letterman's Top 10 lists.

The enigmatic Paar, host of NBC's *Tonight* (1957-62), pioneered the late-night talk format and with it became the most successful presence on late night television to date. During his half decade at the show, he more than tripled the number of affiliate stations that carried the program (from 46 to 170).¹⁹³

Paar grabbed the national spotlight by picking fights with the likes of Ed Sullivan, Walter Winchell and William Paley, and surrounded himself with a stable of

¹⁹² Every president for the previous 52 years, from Roosevelt to George H.W. Bush, either was president during World War II, served in the war itself or was a member of the generation that fought the war.

¹⁹³ Ron Simon "Paar, Jack," The Museum of Broadcast Communications
<<http://www.museum.tv/carchives/etv/P/htmlP/Paarjack/Paarjack.htm>>.

eccentrics such as the outspoken Elsa Maxwell, the irreverent Alexander King, and British raconteurs Robert Morley, Bea Lillie and Peter Ustinov.¹⁹⁴ He helped resurrect the careers of aging performers such as Cliff “Charlie Weaver” Arquette and Hermione Gingold, and he nurtured young comedic talent such as Bob Newhart, the Smothers Brothers and Bill Cosby.¹⁹⁵ He also took the talk show format out of the controlled studio and stamped his brand of politics on late-night tv.

Paar was a vocal opponent of the Batista regime and traveled to Cuba to air a special report, “The Background of the Revolution.” He asked Robert Kennedy, then chief counsel of the Senate Labor-Management Relations Committee, to appear on his show to discuss his investigation of organized crime in the unions. And in 1961, he went to Berlin to broadcast from a site near the wall as it was nearing completion.

Carson replaced Paar in 1962, and during the next three decades, he grew to near regal status with success that earned him the nickname “the king of late night.” Unlike Paar, Carson kept coy about his personal politics and insisted the only message of his program was entertainment. Yet, his widespread popularity gave politicians, who were always fair game for his opening monologue, reason to carefully follow his show.

During the 1992 Democratic primary, Carson simultaneously lampooned Clinton and Jerry Brown, noting that Brown admitted that he had smoked marijuana in the 60s “but didn’t exhale.” Discussing the vice president, a favorite target, he said, “You get the feeling that Dan Quayle's golf bag doesn't have a full set of irons.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

Carson's political talk generally concluded with the signature golf swing that signaled the end to his opening monologue. The rest of the show tended to center around self-deprecating antics and skits which, according to his 2005 obituary in the *New York Times*, made him "the most popular star American television has known."¹⁹⁷ Bill Carter, the *Times* TV critic, wrote that Carson's "scrubbed Midwestern presence was so appealing that he succeeded in unifying a fractured nation" during the tumultuous sixties and seventies.¹⁹⁸ Tom Shales, who covers media for the *Washington Post*, attributed Carson's longevity to the fact that he was "affable, accessible, charming and amusing, not just a very funny comedian but the kid of guy you would gladly welcome into your home."¹⁹⁹

Carson's grip on late night was virtually unshakeable. The most noble and successful of Carson's competitors was Cavett, who hosted "The Dick Cavett Show" (1969-75) on ABC. Cavett began as a writer for Paar, Merv Griffin and Carson, but his high-brow humor and conversational style soon earned him the chance to host his own show. One profiler noted: "His interviewing technique was a marvel of tone. He could make banal questions into little occasions--for storytelling, opinion, whatever--as he ceded control to his guest with the expectation that they do what was necessary to make the conversation lively."²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Richard Severo and Bill Carter, "Johnny Carson. Low-Key King of Late-Night TV, Dies at 79, *New York Times* 24 Jan. 2005.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹⁹ Ibid

Cavett was known for being more open to rock-and-roll artists than Carson. His guests included Janis Joplin, Mick Jagger, Stevie Wonder, Jefferson Airplane, Sly and the Family Stone, and David Bowie as well as prominent authors, politicians and personalities outside the field of entertainment. He also was known for a type of controversy with his guests that Carson avoided. In 1970, Georgia Governor Lester Maddox stormed off the set during a discussion of segregation. A year later, an interview with Norman Mailer turned famously contentious. According to one account,²⁰¹ Mailer moved his chair away from the other guests, prompting the following exchange:

CAVETT. Perhaps you'd like another chair to contain your giant intellect.

MAILER. Why don't you just read the next question on your card there?

CAVETT. Why don't you fold it five ways and put it where the sun don't (sic) shine?

MAILER. Did you just come up with that line?

CAVETT. Surely, I don't have to tell you a quote from Tolstoy.

Back at NBC, for nine years beginning in 1973, Carson was followed by *The Tomorrow Show with Tom Snyder*. Snyder offered a slightly different fare tailored more tightly around his personal interests and politics. He was known for a style that alternated between hard-hitting questions and personal observations that created the air of a conversation rather than an interview. He was known to joke frequently with off-

²⁰⁰ David Skinner, "Televised Talk; Dick Cavett, master gabmeister of the 1970s," *Weekly Standard*, 18 Dec. 2006.

²⁰¹ Google video titled "Charlie Rose - Dick Cavett, 57 min - Mar 5, 2001."

stage crewmen and break out in a trademark laugh, which coupled with seemingly mismatched jet black eyebrows and grey hair provided the visual model for Aykroyd's impersonation on *Saturday Night Live*.²⁰² The show's highlights included John Lennon's final televised interview (April 1975), an appearance by Ayn Rand (1979) and an interview with Charles Manson (1981). *The Tomorrow Show* was cancelled in 1982 to make room for Letterman, whom network executives were rumored to be grooming to replace Carson.

Although Carson was not seen as overtly political, he made two professional decisions that played a huge role in the rise of political talk on late-night television.

Saturday Night Live, with its tradition of political satire including but not limited to the Weekend Update segment, wasn't created because NBC executives were eager to risk a lucrative time slot, according to Tom Shales and James Miller, authors of an oral history of the show.²⁰³ For years, they write, NBC had offered its affiliates reruns of *The Tonight Show* known as *The Best of Carson* for their late-night slots on Saturday or Sunday. Carson fought the practice because he wanted to use the shows on weeknights so he could get more vacation. In 1974, he told NBC to yank them altogether, which left the network two choices: return the weekend time to local stations – and lose a hefty share of ad revenue or fill the slot with another program. NBC decided to develop a new show, and *Saturday Night Live* debuted in 1975. As Shales and Miller remind us:

The people who own and run commercial television networks don't put a show on the air because they imagine it will break bravely with tradition or set grand

²⁰² NBC, *Saturday Night Live*, archive. <http://snl.jt.org/imp.php?i=26>

²⁰³ Shales and Miller.

new aesthetic standards or stretch the boundaries of the medium – or for any reason whatsoever other than to make money.²⁰⁴

Four episodes into its first season (November 8, 1975), *Saturday Night Live* offered its first skit with a presidential character. Chevy Chase opened the show as a clumsy Ford, who could barely make it through a speech without a physical mishap. A month later, he had polished the character into a mainstay of the show.²⁰⁵ The following year, Aykroyd crafted a highly successful parody of Carter that played well with Chase's Ford as the 1976 election approached. Parodies of Carter and Ford quickly became staples of the lineup. Chase also served as the original host of the popular Weekend Update news cast.

Appendix 1 shows the frequency with which presidents and presidential candidates appeared during twenty-eight seasons from 1975 to 2002. In all, these characters appeared 293 times. Clinton was in more skits than any president, appearing seventy times between the 1991-2 and 2001-2 seasons. That is roughly twice the number of the next two popular characters, the elder Bush and Reagan, who appeared in thirty-eight and thirty-seven skits respectively. Other characters that appeared ten times or more include: the younger Bush and Carter (twenty-eight appearances each), Dole (twenty-five appearances), Ford (seventeen appearances), Gore (fifteen appearances), Ross Perot (eleven appearances) and Nixon (ten appearances).

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 3.

²⁰⁵ In "Ford Fireside Chat," which seems mild by today's standards, Chase takes slapstick to an extreme as Ford literally crashes into the Christmas tree while trimming it.

Despite their popularity in the early seasons and in recent years, the number of presidential characters dropped significantly during the late 1970s and stayed low for most of the 1980s. During the eleven seasons from 1977-8 to 1987-8, the average number of appearances dropped to roughly five characters per season.

Barry W. Blaustein, a head writer and supervising producer during the early 1980s, claims the show was directly affected by social mores and perceived cultural swings of the country.²⁰⁶ The Reagan Era was a time, Blaustein says, when the show's producers and NBC executives were still finding a place for political satire on late night television. Consequently, they may have been overly sensitive to what they perceived would be accepted by the public. He told Shales and Miller:

Reagan's election set the tone. There was a kind of impending doom hanging over the country, and there was palpably a move toward conservatism at the network. We tried ideas for sketches that the network would shoot down. The censors would say, "You can't do that." We'd point out they did something similar with Aykroyd (who played Carter for the show) three years earlier, and the censor would say, "Yeah, but that was then. This is now. Things are different."²⁰⁷

By 1987, the shine on the Reagan Administration was fading. Democrats had swept back into control of the United States Senate, the Iran-Contra scandal was heating up, and many voters were re-energized at the prospects for 1988, the first presidential election in twenty years between two non-incumbents. During the fourteen seasons

²⁰⁶ Blaustein began a twenty-year collaborative relationship with David Sheffield with a three-year stint on *Saturday Night Live*. In all, they wrote more than 150 sketches for the show.

²⁰⁷ Shales and Miller, 223.

from 1988-9 to 2001-2, the average number of appearances tripled to roughly fifteen characters per season. Election years became peak season for presidential characters.

Shales and Miller contend that among the best all-time skits on the show was a 1988 primary “debate” that starred Al Franken as Pat Robertson, Dana Carvey as George H.W. Bush (in the early stages of what would become a classic imitation), and Aykroyd, returning to the show as a hilariously petty Dole. Remarkably, many of the high-profile officials (Ford, Janet Reno, etc...) who were roasted on the show later appeared on it, if asked. Shales and Miller write: “During the (Dick) Ebersol years, SNL dabbled only lightly and mildly in political humor, but once (Lorne) Michaels returned the show began to build a stronger and flintier political side. In time it became an integral if impudent part of the process.”²⁰⁸

The elder Bush was so enamored of Carvey’s impression that he invited Carvey to the White House and eventually taped an opening for the show. Carvey told Shales and Miller:

In the beginning of George Bush’s tenure, he was so damn popular, I think he saw some of those sketches where the angle was how happy he was. It wasn’t until the last eighteen months, where we had the recession and the no-new-taxes thing, where some of the stuff was heavier hitting. I think between Lorne and Al Franken, they would have allowed me to make it soft. We make fun of liberals, too, you know.²⁰⁹

The cultural shift occurring on SNL was also finding its way into the monologues of the hosts for late-night network television. The change was so evident that in 1989, the non-partisan Center for Media and Public Affairs launched a scholarly

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 346.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 347.

study of political humor on late night television.²¹⁰ It was built on a simple content analysis designed to identify who was being selected as the subject of the jokes each night on *The Tonight Show*, increasingly hosted by Leno, and *Late Night with David Letterman*. Findings soon began to show a steady increase year after year, and the study continued for more than a decade.

In 1989, the top joke target was George H.W. Bush with 143 jokes. Others in the Top 10 had only tangential political connections. Manuel Noriega was fourth with 74 jokes. Jim and Tammy Bakker were fifth with 66 jokes, and Rob Lowe finished 10th with 22 jokes.

The number of jokes escalated as the 1992 presidential campaign with its clash of colorful characters - Perot, Clinton and an increasingly unpopular incumbent Bush - got underway.

That year, to the shock of many Americans, Carson made the second of his two career moves that paved the way for this change. With six months left in a contentious election - one that people were starting to see could signal a generational change in American politics - he quit the Tonight Show for good. Network executives passed over Letterman and chose Leno to succeed him. The move sparked a ratings rivalry that after six months blew into full blown warfare when Letterman decided to move to CBS and challenge Leno directly.

Clinton, an astute observer of popular culture, saw what was happening and in typical fashion tried to engage it. In March 1993, a few days after Supreme Court

²¹⁰ Lichter and Lichter.

Justice Byron White announced that he would resign, Clinton joked during the warm-up to his weekly radio address (broadcast on Saturday) that he might replace White with Leno. Reporters heard the remarks over a microphone that Clinton thought was off and reported the remarks.

The following Monday, in a rare reference to Carson – also hinting at how close he had come to losing the *Tonight Show* job to Letterman - Leno noted that he was flattered but not interested.²¹¹ In his opening monologue, Leno told his audience, “I’ve already replaced one famous guy who was on the job for 30 years, and I never want to go through that again, thank you.”

With that, a dialogue had begun among late-night television hosts about national politics and the politicians who shape them that would change late-night TV for at least a generation.

By the end of that year, the paradigm clearly had shifted. Clinton was the runaway leader with 761 jokes about him. He was followed by Ross Perot in second place with 100. Others on the list included Al Gore (97 jokes), Hillary Clinton (61 jokes) and Roger Clinton (52 jokes).

Five years later, at the height of the impeachment proceedings, Clinton topped the chart with 1,712 jokes. Others on the list included: Monica Lewinsky (332 jokes) Kenneth Star (139 jokes) Hillary Clinton (100 jokes) Linda Tripp (90 jokes), and Paula Jones (88 jokes).

²¹¹ Bill Carter, “Leno’s Plan to Counter Letterman: Be Funnier,” *New York Times*, 5 March 1993. C17.

By the time the Clinton Era ended, the center compiled a master list of the Top 10 joke targets from 1989 to April 2002. Again, Clinton was the runaway winner. Leno and Letterman together told 6,380 jokes about Clinton during that time. George W. Bush and Al Gore finished close in second and third with 1,276 and 1,084 jokes respectively. To show how the list changed over time, Noriega, the Bakers, Lowe and others had vanished. The only non-politician on the Top 10 list for that 12-year period was O.J. Simpson, who was the subject of 962 jokes.

As the 2000 election began to heat up, it seemed that network executives, politicians, journalists and stand-up comedians were all in collusion – even if much of it was unconscious – to erode the longstanding lines that separated political news and entertainment, a essential element for journalistic credibility during the era of the objective press.

“The road to the White House runs though me,” Letterman famously joked when hosting Bush during the 2000 primary.²¹²

But to a large extent for many Americans he wasn’t kidding.

²¹² Dana Milbank, *Washington Post*, SouthCoast Today. Oct. 22, 2000.
<<http://www.s-t.com/daily/10-00/10-22-00/a09wn034.htm>>

CHAPTER 5

HUMOR AS JOURNALISM

Perhaps the most peculiar statement uttered in the wake of Stewart's 2009 confrontation with CNBC *Mad Money* host Jim Cramer came from NBC President Jeff Zucker, who offered the observation that Stewart had been "incredibly unfair."²¹³ It's a ridiculous remark from a man at the head of a company that includes one of the premiere news organizations in the world. Few people should understand the ethos of the news business - including what is and what is not news - better than Zucker.

Fairness traditionally bolsters journalistic credibility and gives news currency that makes it more valuable in the marketplace. But, as this chapter will show, the nature of comedy is precisely the opposite. Comedy rarely is fair. In fact, the more *unfair* the joke, the more currency it tends to have. And despite the frame Zucker and others routinely try to impose on Stewart, he is by training and avocation a comedian, not a journalist.

Sigmund Freud set out to examine how humor works and documented his findings in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud makes it clear from the onset that jokes are neither cavalier nor capricious - that we experience the enjoyment

²¹³ Barbara Ortutay, Associated Press. "NBC chief calls Jon Stewart's CNBC attacks 'unfair'," *USA Today*, 18 March 2009.

of overcoming our enemies by making them small, inferior, despicable or comic.²¹⁴

His research on jokes came a few years after his seminal study of dreams. It concludes that jokes are akin to verbal dreams in that they stem from repression and use condensed narrative to mediate conflict and wish-fulfillment. Freud argues that tendentious jokes, those with a purpose, function as ersatz political activity rooted in seduction or subversion. Namely, the teller of the joke gets the audience to laugh at a third party. By doing so, the audience joins the teller in a social or political alliance.

Clearly, Freud is not describing a “fair” journalistic process. So, what precisely did happen between Stewart and Cramer? What would prompt Zucker to publicly apply a journalistic standard to the work of a nationally recognized comedian? And what is it about Stewart’s work that gives it such salience, not just in the mind of Zucker but to the American public?

To begin this examination, a quick review of the Stewart-Cramer exchange is in order.

In early 2009, news stories involving CNBC’s role in reporting on the stock market meltdown prompted Stewart to run a few random skits in February that targeted CNBC. However, things hit critical mass on March 4, when *The Daily Show* aired an eight-minute video that featured CNBC anchors and pundits reporting last fall and early this year that the stock market was bullish.

The clip offered a rapid succession of video bites with various CNBC analysts. In one specific cut, Cramer proclaimed, “Bear Stearns is fine. Do not get your money

²¹⁴Freud.

out. Bear Stearns is not in trouble.” The quote was followed by a graphic that noted “Bear Stearns went under 6 days later.” After a litany of similar clips followed by graphics that showed CNBC pundits offering bad information to viewers, Stewart concluded with the quip, “If I’d only followed CNBC’s advice, I’d have a million dollars today – provided I’d started with \$100 million.”²¹⁵

In his weekly column four days later, Frank Rich praised Stewart for a “takedown of the stars of CNBC, the business network that venerated our financial gods, plugged their stocks and hyped the bubble’s reckless delusions (Just as it had in the dot-com bubble.).” He added:

It’s particularly rich to hear Cramer tar Obama (or anyone else) for “wealth destruction” when he followed up his bum steer to viewers on Bear Stearns with oleaginous on-camera salesmanship for Wachovia and its brilliant chief executive, a Cramer friend and former boss, just two weeks before it, too, collapsed. What should really terrify the White House is that Cramer last month gave a big thumbs-up to Timothy Geithner’s bank-rescue plan.²¹⁶

Cramer responded the next day on Mainstreet.com with a post that alleged his words had been taken out of context.

Both (Frank Rich and Jon Stewart) seize on the urban legend that I recommended Bear Stearns the week before it collapsed, even though I was saying that I thought it could be worthless as soon as the following week. I did tell an e-mailer that his deposit in his account at Bear Stearns was safe, but through a clever sound bite, Stewart, and subsequently Rich – neither of whom have bothered to listen to the context of the pulled quote – pass-off the notion of

²¹⁵ Jon Stewart, “CNBC Give s Financial Advice,” *The Daily Show*, Comedy Central, 4 March 2009. <<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoid=220252&title=cnbc-gives-financial-advice>>.

²¹⁶ Frank Rich, “Some Things Don’t Change in Grover’s Corners,” *The New York Times*, 7 March 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/08/opinion/08rich.html>>.

account safety as an out-and-out buy recommendation. The absurdity astounds me.²¹⁷

That evening, Stewart delivered a blistering follow-up. From his studio set built to resemble a television anchor's desk, he told viewers, "As you may recall, last Wednesday we devoted a portion of this program to a fair-minded, reasoned critique of the network CNBC. Here's a quick clip."

STEWART. (staring directly into the camera at the end of the segment from the previous week). Fuck you.²¹⁸

After raucous applause, Stewart introduced a new segment that took direct aim at Cramer.

STEWART. Well, we went back to the tape to listen.

CRAMER (on tape). Should I be worried about Bear Sterns in terms of liquidity and get my money out of there? No, No, No. Bear Sterns is fine. Do not get your money out...Bear Sterns is not in trouble.

STEWART (in the studio addressing the audience). OK, I was wrong... Actually it was true; he was not saying buy Bear Sterns. He was saying that if Bear Sterns is your broker or if your money is in Bear, your money would not disappear. He was not addressing the value of Bear stock, so, Jim Cramer. I apologize. That was out of

²¹⁷ Jim Cramer, "Cramer Takes on the White House, Frank Rich and Jon Stewart," *Mainstreet.com*, 10 March 2009.
<<http://www.mainstreet.com/article/moneyinvesting/news/cramer-takes-white-house-frank-rich-and-jon-stewart?>>

²¹⁸ Jon Stewart, "In Cramer We Trust," *The Daily Show*, Comedy Central, 9 March 2009.
<<http://www.thedailyshow.com/video/index.jhtml?videoId=220288&title=in-cramer-we-trust>>.

context. Technically, you were correct. You weren't suggesting to buy Bear Stearns.

(Pause for comedic effect.) That was something you did five days earlier in your buy-and-sell segment. (Roll tape.)

CRAMER (on tape). I believe in the Bear franchise. You know at \$69 I am not giving up on the thing.

STEWART (to the audience). While Cramer wasn't giving up on it at \$69, 11 days later, the market was more comfortable with it at (pause for comedic effect): two... He's not saying directly I'm asking you to buy Bear Stearns. For that you'd have to go back seven weeks before the stock completely collapsed. (Roll tape.)

CRAMER. I'm asking people who are watching this video to buy Bear Stearns.

STEWART (to audience). Now, that was seven weeks before it completely collapsed. In the interest of context, continue.

CRAMER (on tape). I'm asking people who are watching this video to buy Bear Stearns. Now, Bear Stearns acts much better than it should. Now, that is just intuition, and I don't want to put too much faith in intuition, but I have had good intuition in over 29 years of investment, and I just think that one has a very big upside, very limited downside here. It is I think that the last quarter they staunched the losses... they are very good at cutting their losses at Bear, and Bear I believe is for sale.

STEWART (to the audience and by implication to Cramer). Fuck you!

That exchange – not Rich's column – was reported widely in daily newspapers, on cable news and numerous blogs. Cramer even appeared on the Today Show, where his take was much different than Zucker's. When Meredith Vieira asked him about the

“In Cramer We Trust” clip Stewart ran on March 9, Cramer laughed it off saying,

“A comedian's attacking me? Wow! He runs a variety show.”²¹⁹

The attention mainstream media such as the Associated Press, Reuters, NPR and CNN paid to the Stewart-Cramer confrontation shows how seriously the journalistic community takes Stewart's work. Decades ago, Frank Rich's Sunday column on *The New York Times* editorial page would have been the equivalent of a journalistic body blow – the subject of intense speculation among journalists about the future of Cramer and his show.

These days, the fact that Rich was virtually eclipsed by Stewart is not surprising. And a look at how pundits reacted to Stewart's work is a starting point that can help determine precisely where Stewart fits in the modern journalistic world.

Tucker Carlson, the conservative pundit who lost his job when Crossfire was cancelled, described Stewart as “a partisan demagogue” in an interview with Politico during the Cramer affair. Carlson said:

Jim Cramer may be sweaty and pathetic — he certainly was last night — but he's not responsible for the current recession. His real sin was attacking Obama's economic policies. If he hadn't done that, Stewart never would have gone after him. Stewart's doing Obama's bidding. It's that simple.”²²⁰

Arianna Huffington, a liberal pundit who ran special coverage of the Stewart-Cramer story on her website, saw Stewart's work as “a pivotal moment -- not just for Stewart, Cramer, and CNBC but also for journalism.” She wrote: “It was a bracing

²¹⁹ Jason Linkins, “Jim Cramer Defends himself on Today Show (Video),” *The Huffington Post*, 10 March 2009. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/03/10/jim-cramer-defends-himself_n_173450.html>.

²²⁰ Calderone.

reminder of what great research and a journalist more committed to getting to the truth than to landing the big get -- and keeping the big get happy, and ensuring future big gets -- can accomplish.”²²¹

Jim Moore, an Emmy-winning political reporter and best-selling author, argued that Stewart’s work on Cramer worked because Stewart employed journalistic production methods to frame his comedy. In a column for *The Huffington Post* on the Cramer affair, he wrote:

The practice of juxtaposing sound bites or quotes all but disappeared in journalism because few reporters had the time or inclination to search for context. They just wanted the here and the now and one side shouting at the other as if life were a cable program. (Yeah, I know, it almost is.) Reporters used to brag when they accomplished such coups as finding the historic contradictory quote, and their colleagues were justifiably jealous. Jon Stewart has brought back context to journalism by making people in our drive-by culture responsible for their words and even actions.²²²

Finally, there is Cramer, himself, who unlike his network boss, Zucker, doesn’t complain about Stewart’s journalistic sense of fairness. As noted earlier, Cramer simply dismisses Stewart as a comedian. After he made statements directly to that effect on the Today show, Vieira rolled a piece of the Stewart clip and pressed for comment further, but Cramer stuck to his position.

This is a terrible market, which is why I told people to sell. Everything.

²²¹ Arianna Huffington, “What if Jon Stewart Instead of Jon King Interviewed Dick Cheney,” *The Huffington Post*, 16 March 2009.
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/what-if-jon-stewart-inste_b_175503.html>.

²²² James Moore, “And a Comic Shall Lead Them,” *The Huffington Post*, 10 March 2009.
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-moore/and-a-comic-shall-lead-th_b_173734.html>

But you think he is going to run that tape? No, because he's got a comedy show. Maybe he's going to start talking about Tier 1 capital and how to save Citi (Corp.). But that would kill his ratings.²²³

The Social Purpose of Journalism

Arizona Sen. John McCain, the 2008 Republican presidential nominee, wrote in his memoir *Faith of Our Fathers* that during five and a half years as a prisoner of war what he missed most was not personal comforts, good food, freedom to move about or even his family and friends. "The thing I missed most," he wrote, "was information – free, uncensored, undistorted, abundant information."²²⁴

That's an extreme example, but sociologists and communication scholars have found that even in ordinary life, humans have a basic need and desire to know what is going on in their world. Knowing what is going on elsewhere – particularly knowing things a person doesn't witness firsthand – creates a sense of security. It's the old adage: knowledge is power. Just think about the ritual most of us participate in when we meet up with a friend. The first thing we do is ask for information. How are you? What have you been up to? How was your day?

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel call it "the awareness instinct." And it's that instinct, they argue, that on a much larger and more significant scale creates the market for journalism – the independent, reliable, accurate and comprehensive information that citizens require to be free.²²⁵

²²³ Linkins.

²²⁴ John McCain, with Mark Salter, *Faith of My Fathers*, (New York: Random House, 1999) p 221.

So how do we know journalism when we see it?

Kovach and Rosenstiel offer nine principles of journalism that journalists seem to agree on and that citizens have a right to expect from news organizations. The list is based on their work with the Committee of Concerned Journalists, which included 21 public forums attended by 3,000 people and testimony from more than 300 journalists.

Those principles are:

- Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
- Its first loyalty is to citizens.
- Its essence is a discipline of verification.
- Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.
- It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
- It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
- It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
- It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
- Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

More precise and traditional definitions of journalism as it exists in the United States can be difficult to find. Some attempts are made in ethics codes and mission statements of professional groups, such as the American Society of Newspaper Editors, which claims its mission is to “serve the general welfare by informing the people.”

The Society of Professional Journalists (founded in 1909 at DePauw University as Sigma Delta Chi) is widely considered as the closest thing to a national professional

²²⁵ Kovach and Rosenstiel, 10.

organization for the industry. With members drawn from broadcast, print and online journalists, journalism educators and students, it states its mission is to perpetuate a free media as a cornerstone of American life. Its code of ethics maintains that “...enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues.”²²⁶

A key difference between SPJ and national organizations that oversee professions such as law and medicine is that the SPJ code of ethics is voluntary.²²⁷ Its ethical code is meant to be a guide for professional behavior and decision-making but not a set of rules; the group doesn’t even have a disciplinary committee.

The rationale SPJ gives for this arrangement stems from the basic way journalists see their profession: It has a constitutional protection, no licenses and no official or quasi-governmental regulation. SPJ takes the position that its code of ethics must be voluntary, because any other arrangement would make it unenforceable.²²⁸

When the issue of shield laws and other legal protections emerge, many journalists believe that to define journalism is to limit it. It’s largely the reason American journalism has avoided the kind of licensing professions such as doctors and lawyers enforce.

²²⁶ Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics.
<<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>>.

²²⁷ Although estimates show roughly 10 percent of practicing journalists officially belong to SPJ, the organization’s influence extends well beyond its membership. News organizations and journalism schools routinely use its standards for professional practice as guidelines for work done by journalists who are not official members.

²²⁸ Ibid.

Most journalists are comfortable with the situation. Jacob Weisberg of *Slate* notes, “Journalism doesn’t require any specific training, or institutional certification, or organizational memberships, or even regular employment. It’s just an activity some people engage in that is protected under the Constitution.”²²⁹

Those theories may seem ethereal, but they actually play out in social and legal practice. A common issue that draws on them is the idea of state and federal shield laws. Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia offer shield law protections. Four states offer limited protections for journalists, and sixteen give no statutory rights. The laws vary from state to state. Some protections apply to civil but not to criminal proceedings. Others allow journalists to withhold the identities of confidential sources, but not the confidential information

Scholars have weighed in on the issue.

Carey takes the constitutional construction of journalism almost literally and offers an interpretation of the First Amendment not widely taught in journalism schools or political science departments. He argues that the United States was founded based on a specific idea of what public life could be and the First Amendment codifies that. He writes:

To put it in an artlessly simple way, the First Amendment says that people are free to gather together to have public spaces, free of the intrusion of the state or its representatives. Once gathered they are free to speak to one another to carry on public discourse freely and openly. They are further free to write down what they have to say and to share it beyond the immediate place of utterance...The

²²⁹ Jacob Weisberg, “Who is a Journalist?” *Slate*, 9 March 2005. <http://www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=print&id=2114581>.

religion clause merely says that people may not be excluded from public space and discussion even on the basis of religion (which was the burning issue of the day).²³⁰

Carey sees journalism as a particular form of social practice, “a form of inscribing the world, first in speech, then in print, then in the modern advanced arts of broadcasting and electronics.” What unified the practice across time, media and organization, he wrote, is its democratic context.²³¹ He takes the position that journalism as a practice is unthinkable except in the context of democracy; in fact he sees the two as virtually indistinguishable. He writes:

The practices of journalism are not self-justifying; they are not ends in themselves. Rather, they are justified in terms of the social consequences they engender, namely, the constitution of a democratic social order.²³²

Schudson acknowledges the importance of news organizations to a democracy, but he takes the position that they by themselves are not democracy and that they do not create democracy. He notes that news organizations as institutions have coexisted decade after decade with undemocratic, authoritarians and repressive regimes.²³³

Schudson defines journalism as “the business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and

²³⁰ James Carey, “The Press, Public Opinion and Public Discourse,” *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, ed. Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p239.

²³¹ James Carey, “The Culture in Question,” *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, ed. Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p 333.

²³² Carey, *James Carey: A Critical Reader*, p 332.

²³³ Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News*, (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 2003) 198.

importance.”²³⁴ He argues that journalists not only report reality; they create it: “By selecting, highlighting, framing, shading and shaping in reportage, they create an impression that real people – readers and viewers – then take to be real and to which they respond in their lives.”²³⁵

While Carey, the communications scholar, tends to view journalism from a more philosophical level, Schudson, the sociologist, focuses more on the systems and structures that sustain it. He observes that most daily news, whether television or newspaper reports, comes from planned, intentional events, press releases, press conferences and scheduled interviews. And he explains that’s because journalists work in a professional environment that includes public relations firms, public information officers, political spin doctors and the publicity staffs of a wide variety of institutions, both corporate and nonprofit.²³⁶ He writes:

Sociologists delight in revealing how much of news is produced by the best laid plans of government officials and other parajournalists who maneuver to shape news to their own purposes; the journalist enjoys pointing out that the best laid plans often go astray.²³⁷

He challenges Carey’s notion that “there were media in the old Soviet Union just as there was communication and even something resembling a news business.

²³⁴ Schudson, 11.

²³⁵ Schudson, 2.

²³⁶ Ibid 3.

²³⁷ Ibid 6.

There just wasn't any journalism, because there was no democracy, which alone gives rise to the social practice of journalism."²³⁸

And he argues that Carey's evaluation conflates an empirical description of journalism with a normative public philosophy.

Carey would like there to have been (and still to be) a practice called journalism that is dedicated to circulating the voices of engaged citizens who debate the common good and so generate new arguments, engage new voices and regenerate society through politics. At some points in history something like this has happened: Thomas Paine...William Lloyd Garrison, etc... (But) if this is all that counts as journalism, what is everything else that goes by its name?²³⁹

In sum, there is no set definition of the social purpose of journalism, not even within the United States and not even if limited to the modern era. The journalism industry purposefully leaves that open to interpretation. Various trade associations and professional societies publicize guidelines for professional practice, but those guidelines address professional ethics and conduct. They provide little if any guidance for how to identify an outstanding product. Journalistic organizations, trade groups and educational institutions such as the Associated Press, the Society for Professional Journalists and The Columbia Graduate School of Journalism bestow awards for outstanding work, but those prizes are determined by judges who through their own experience tend to privilege the methodology – the news gathering routines - rather than any subjective purpose behind the work.

Carey offers a distinct social purpose for journalism, which is to help citizens have conversations about things they need to discuss to participate in their communities

²³⁸ Carey, 332.

²³⁹ Schudson, 198-9.

and our democracy as a whole. Schudson acknowledges that to some extent journalism has at least in the past performed that function. However, he challenges some of the basic assumptions many within the industry today hold forth. For example, he takes the position that journalists “create” news, though the nuance he gives the verb “create” tends to refer to the editing process and differs largely from that most journalists would give it in this situation.

A key difference between Carey and Schudson lies in the examination of how the journalistic product (news) co-exists with the more voluminous mass communication product (general information) within the confines of our public sphere and collective awareness. News is a subset of information, and the challenge of separating the two can be tough, in part because we receive them through similar delivery systems. Moreover, audiences sometimes don’t bother to think consciously about the difference.

And this nebulous, grey area within overlapping genres provides social and linguistic cover for satire to creep into the equation.

The Social Purpose of Comedy

Laughter relieves tension and helps us relax. Indeed, causing someone to laugh is one of the more generous and deeply personal things a human can do for another.

Comedians such as Stewart and Stephen Colbert – like Mort Sahl, Will Rogers even Mark Twain before them – seem at times to cast near-hypnotic spells on their audiences, causing them to consider current events and old ideas in new ways. As Mintz notes, these moments of communal laughter reduce the larger world to a more

manageable and less threatening place. In this way, a comedian serves two near

universal functions:

...he is permitted to say things about society that we want and need to have uttered publicly, but would be too dangerous and too volatile if done without the mediation of humor; and as a comic character, he can represent through caricature, those negative traits which we wish to hold up to ridicule, to feel superior to and to renounce through laughter.²⁴⁰

This pleasant, ritualistic type of communication is not a recent phenomenon. It can be traced over centuries to cultures in Europe, Asia, Africa, Central and South America, where jesters, tricksters and fools have appeared in both primitive and technologically advanced societies.²⁴¹ Scholars note that these comedic archetypes almost always show vulnerability – a marginalization, often self-proclaimed - that allows them to act idiosyncratically instead of behaving in a way that supports social cohesiveness. Doing so gives the audience a vehicle it can use to relate to their humanity. So, in the end, the comedian offers a subversive appeal that meets the audiences need for a vicarious challenge to authority and/or the status quo.

In medieval Europe, priests were allowed to challenge the great power of the Catholic Church at church-sanctioned events where they donned masks, engaged in irreverent status inversions of reigning potentates and mimicked sacred events.²⁴² Over time, the church hierarchy saw the subversive nature of these festivals, and withdrew its support, causing the events to move into secular production.

²⁴⁰ Mintz, *American Humor*, 1-3.

²⁴¹ Olson, *Humor in America*, 110.

²⁴² Townsen.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, scholar Albert McLean notes, vaudeville, a uniquely American genre, rose to counter powerful and unprecedented forces in American culture. He argues that symbols and characters in many vaudeville acts expressed a need Americans of that time had to resist dystopian images of urbanization and the new industrialism, which were changing life in the country.²⁴³

In between, Shakespeare, who mastered irony in the early seventeenth century, scratched the surface of work that Freud and Lippmann would conduct later when he and penned the phrase “Brevity is the soul of wit.” That literary jewel, spoken by the long-winded Polonius (Hamlet, act 2, scene 2), is the foundation for Freud’s ideas about dreams and subsequently jokes, and Lippmann’s work with stereotypes and public opinion, both seminal to the study of political humor.

It’s important to note that during the 1980s and 1990s, critics raised serious methodological questions about Freud’s work. Many claim rightly that he was not a natural scientist in any sense of the word. They characterize him instead as a theorist whose ideas have been disproved or, somewhat contradictorily, are incapable of disproof and therefore not scientific theories in the first place.²⁴⁴ To them, he’s someone whose work challenges the notion of personal responsibility by claiming with little scientific proof that neurotic adult behavior is rooted in childhood trauma that can be discovered through extended conversation - and that the conversational process alone,

²⁴³ Albert F. McLean Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975).

²⁴⁴ Dr. Anthony Daniels, Freud on the couch, *Timesonline* 5 May 2006.
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/article713089.ece.>

without any further conscious effort on the patient's part, is powerful enough to cure deep-seated neurosis.

Yet, there has been some recent resurgence of Freudianism in both the natural sciences and the humanities. Some neuroscientists now see Freud's model of the mind - rendered in English as id, ego, and superego - as accurate.²⁴⁵ More important for this study, as Eli Zaretsky notes in *Secrets of the Soul: A Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*, Freudianism has "done better as a cultural hermeneutic," i.e. as literary and cultural theory.

Many intellectuals and scholars have always appreciated Freud more as a writer than as a scientist. Especially in the hands of French intellectuals, such as Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari and Cixaus, psychoanalytic theory (has) gained great cachet in the humanities.²⁴⁶

Freud found that raucous laughter – the type that busts from the gut – is a raw, seemingly spontaneous emotion that paradoxically depends on a complex set of social nuances and psychological synapses; the nuanced smirk or finessed grin perhaps even more so.

He divides jokes into two types: innocent and tendentious.²⁴⁷ Innocent jokes are generally told when a person wants to show a small degree of cleverness. They usually draw a light chuckle, and rarely achieve the sudden burst of laughter that makes a

²⁴⁵ Brian Charles Clark, review of *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis* by Eli Zaretsky, for *curledup.com*, 2004.

²⁴⁶ Clark.

²⁴⁷ Although technically a riddle, Freud uses a wider definition of the term joke that in a broader sense would include this exchange because, more importantly it relies on a witty play on words and does not rely on aggression to realign a social relationship.

tendentious joke so devilishly fun. An example of an innocent joke is the well-worn riddle: What is black and white and red (read) all over? A newspaper.

Since the technique of both types of jokes is nearly identical, Freud's work largely examines what gives tendentious jokes the powerful effect they have.

Tendentious jokes are more pointed; they have a distinct purpose. Virtually all political jokes told by comedians on late-night television are tendentious. An example of a tendentious joke is this one taken from Jay Leno's monologue during the 2004 campaign: "Over the weekend, President Bush told a crowd of supporters in Florida that he is the best protection from the draft. That's not true. Bush's dad was the protection from the draft."²⁴⁸

Tendentious jokes have three actors. The first tells the joke; the second hears the joke; and the third is the object of the joke.²⁴⁹ Freud takes the position that unlike innocent jokes, tendentious jokes are a vehicle for seduction or subversion. Namely, if one person tells you something about a second person and you laugh, that first person has somehow convinced you to join him. Because tendentious jokes are more powerful than innocent ones, they are used almost exclusively when the stakes are higher – at least in the mind of the person telling the joke. Freud writes:

Aggressive jokes are especially favored in order to make tendentiousness or criticisms possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure. The charm of caricatures lies in this same factor: we laugh at

²⁴⁸ Jay Leno, monologue, *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. 22 Oct. 2004. <http://berrysworld.blogspot.com/2004_10_17_berrysworld_archive.html>

²⁴⁹ Freud, 100.

them even if they are unsuccessful simply because we count rebellion against authority as a merit.²⁵⁰

Freud believed that civilization (society and the politics that organize it) is a chief source of human repression, and when we experience repression our bodies absorb the feelings associated with it and push them deep into the psyche.²⁵¹ The repression that causes those feelings can be physical in nature, but it also can be emotional and intellectual, and the feelings repressed are equally acute in all three cases.

In his earlier work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud found the unconscious creates dreams to fulfill the wish of breaking through repression. His later writing on dreams extends that inquiry, and his work on dreams is a foundation for his work on jokes. However, he does not directly argue – as some claim – that jokes are merely verbal dreams.

For example, Freud notes that a dream is a complete asocial mental product. It has nothing to communicate to anyone else. It results from a mental and/or emotional conflict within a single individual. Dreams are often unintelligible to the subject himself, and frankly are rarely interesting to other people. Not only are they confusing and disinteresting to others, they must actually to some extent be cryptic or otherwise they are meaningless.

By contrast, he claims a joke is the most social of all the mental functions designed to elicit pleasure. It must be intelligible to be effective. It may use distortion in

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 105.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 101.

the unconscious only through condensation (shorthand imagery or stereotypes) and displacement to the point where the third person can decode and understand it.

In sum, Freud argues a dream is a wish, albeit one that has been made unrecognizable through mental condensation; a joke is developed play. Though all our mental activities converge in these two processes, dreams serve predominantly for the avoidance of displeasure, but jokes work for the attainment of pleasure.²⁵²

The process that facilitates both jokes and dreams converges in the techniques Freud identifies as: condensation, displacement and indirect representation. According to Freud, jokes are formed when a preconscious thought is given over for a moment to unconscious revision and the outcome is instantly grasped by conscious perception.²⁵³

The repressive activities of modern civilization, therefore, are largely responsible for both dreams and jokes. Freud claims that we often long to enjoy what has been socially repudiated and therefore is lost to us. Renunciation is a difficult process for the human psyche, so we rely on tendentious jokes to undo the renunciation and retrieve what we've lost.²⁵⁴

Tendentious jokes succeed largely because they evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible through self-imposed or societal censorship. They also bribe the listener with a potential to yield of pleasure into taking sides with the teller without much investigation, just as on other occasions we ourselves have been bribed by an innocent joke into over estimating the substance of a statement

²⁵² Ibid, 180.

²⁵³ Ibid, 166.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 101.

expressed jokingly. Freud notes that this is brought out with perfect aptitude in the common phrase “die Lacher auf seine Seite ziehen” (to bring the laughter over to his side). He writes:

By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyments of overcoming him – to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter.²⁵⁵

Crossfire 2004

It’s worth noting that Stewart’s run-in with Cramer was not the first time Stewart had stepped beyond the monologues and skits written for his show on Comedy Central to openly criticize cable news. The back-and-forth between Stewart and Cramer and the media coverage it received drew almost instant comparisons to Stewart’s famous attack on cable news during the 2004 campaign.

About a month before voters went to the polls to choose between George W. Bush and John Kerry, a seminal moment in the history of TV news – and American political reporting – occurred. In a presidential race where rehearsed moments consistently trumped spontaneous ones, the longest running news program on American cable television serendipitously captured what may have been the most important confrontation of the campaign.

Stewart, whose career was clearly on the ascent as “the most trusted name in fake news,” parlayed a guest appearance on CNN’s premiere political talk show into a global denunciation of American cable news. Instead of offering predictable jokes and zingers, Stewart pleaded with hosts Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson to stop the stale,

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 103.

predictable liberal vs. conservative, talking-point/ counter talking point format that had been its trademark for decades.²⁵⁶

He said the show was hurting America; that what its hosts did each day was not honest. He told them they have a responsibility to public discourse and that they fail miserably.

STEWART. See, the thing is we need your help. Right now, you're helping the politicians and the corporations, and we're left out there to mow our lawns.

BEGLALA. By beating up on them? You just said were too rough on them when they make mistakes

STEWART. No, no, no. You're not too tough on them. You're part of their strategies. You are partisan, what do you call it, hacks.

The confrontation drew international headlines. Web sites buzzed with hastily written transcripts of the joust, and news organizations covered it the next day as a legitimate event in the presidential race. A few months later, *Crossfire* was cancelled after twenty-two years.

In remarks to the national press, CNN's president said Stewart's appearance drew attention to the show's shortcomings. "I think he made a good point about the noise level of these type of shows, which does nothing to illuminate the issues of the day." He added that viewers need useful information in a dangerous world "and a bunch of guys screaming at each other simply doesn't accomplish that."

²⁵⁶Stewart *Crossfire* transcript

Twenty-two years is a long time for any television program, and *Crossfire* may have run its course without Stewart. Nonetheless, his appearance was a watershed: the day the face of the most successful “fake news” program on cable TV stood-up to the hosts of the longest running real news program on cable TV - - and go the best of them. It was only one show, but it signaled the beginning of a backlash that Stewart would make his personal cause into the next decade.

Stuart had made similar criticisms of cable networks two years earlier during an interview with Howard Kurtz, media critic for *The Washington Post*. And in 2007, *Hardball* host Chris Matthews appeared on *The Daily Show* to publicize his book, “Life's a Campaign.” That night, Stewart pummeled Matthews with an aggressive round of questions and concluded that the philosophy Matthews espoused in his book was a “recipe for sadness.” Matthews later dubbed it “the worst interview I’ve ever had in my life.”²⁵⁷

Selling Snake Oil

The Stewart-Cramer tiff came to a head on March 12. After nearly a week of back-and-forth on the Internet, in newspaper columns and from the safety of their own shows, Cramer appeared on *The Daily Show*. The event was widely reported the following day with, as a blogger for *ThinkProgress.org* put it, “almost universal acknowledgment that Stewart humiliated Cramer.” Jim Fallows called it a “slaughter,”

²⁵⁷ Michael Calderone, “Media critics pile on Cramer, CNBC,” *The Politico*, 13 March 2009. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0309/19997_Page2.html>.

and *The Huffington Post* ran a giant headline that read, “Jon Stewart eviscerates Jim Cramer and CNBC.”²⁵⁸

Howard Kurtz, media critic for *The Washington Post*, wrote: “Jon Stewart wasn’t trying to be funny. Jim Cramer wasn’t trying to be obnoxious. The result was riveting, if not particularly hilarious, television, with Stewart dominating all the way.”

Kurtz was one of many who saw the event as a virtual re-enactment of the 2004 smack-down between Stewart, Carlson and Begala – so much that he resurrected Stewart as “‘Crossfire Jon,’ the avenging media critic, demanding to know why CNBC failed so badly in warning us, the investing public, of the looming meltdown. He was mad and loaded for Bear Stearns.”²⁵⁹

The part that grabbed Kurtz’s attention and was widely circulated in many journalistic accounts was a simple exchange near the beginning of the conversation that involved an old metaphor: snake oil.²⁶⁰

STEWART. Isn't that, you know, look, we're both snake oil salesmen to a certain extent.

CRAMER. Not necessarily.

STEWART. But we do label the show as snake oil here. Uh, isn't there a

²⁵⁸ Amanda Terkel, “After Being Eviscerated by Jon Stewart, Cramer Skips Morning Show Appearance,” *Think Progress*, 13 March 2009.
<<http://thinkprogress.org/2009/03/13/cramer-morning>.>

²⁵⁹ Howard Kurtz, “Stewart vs. Cramer: A One-Sided Smackdown,” *The Washington Post*, 13 March 2009.

²⁶⁰ Linda Holmes, “The Extended, Uncut Daily Show Jim Cramer Interview,” National Public Radio, archive.
<http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2009/03/the_extended_uncut_daily_show.html>

problem selling snake oil as vitamin tonic and saying that it cures impetigo etc, etc, etc.?

CRAMER. Well...

STEWART. Isn't that the difficulty here? (Moments later, Stewart went for the jugular.)

STEWART. Listen, you knew what the banks were doing, and yet were touting it for months and months -- the entire network was. So now to pretend that this was some sort of crazy, once-in-a-lifetime tsunami that no one could have seen coming was disingenuous at best and criminal at worst.

In the back-and-forth that precedes the “snake oil” quote, Stewart employs a comedic paradigm that features a complex mesh of previously identified elements, including the centuries-old archetype of the fool, which draws on Freudian ideas of subversion and wish fulfillment; and the Freudian technique of condensation, which lays the groundwork for what Lippmann identifies as stereotypes. Taken together, they provide a frame for the overall conversation that casts Stewart – not Cramer – as both a sympathetic character and a national sounding board.

The fool often marginalizes himself and plays up that condition before he speaks truth to power. Stewart is widely known for using this technique. His critics claim it is part of a double standard Stewart conveniently hides behind to deflect criticism.

Conservative writer Mark Hemmingway took Stewart to task for it during the Cramer

conflict, writing in the *National Review* that “Stewart’s been having it both ways for far too long.”²⁶¹

When Carlson accused Stewart in 2004 of not being tough enough on Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry, Stewart deflected the charge with the quip:

It's interesting to hear you talk about my responsibility. I didn't realize that ... the news organizations look to Comedy Central for their cues on integrity... You're on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls.²⁶²

With Cramer it was more subtle. Stewart, who had metaphorically raked Cramer over the coals all week, opened the face-to-face interview with an affable apology. He assured Cramer the hard-hitting clips and jokes – the ones that had fueled the conflict for nearly ten days – were nothing personal and virtually impotent. Moving seamlessly into comedic shtick peppered with Yiddish, Stewart explained, “This was not directed at you, per say. I just want you to know that. We threw some banana cream pies at CNBC. Obviously, you got some schmutz on your jacket from it.”²⁶³

So, Stewart only was “throwing banana cream pies”? This is vintage self-marginalization. Slap-stick comedians such as the Three Stooges throw banana cream pies; serious media critics do not. Consider the person who typically gets a pie in the face in a comedic scene or film. It often is a stodgy, powerful, unsympathetic character.

²⁶¹ Mark Hemingway, “Cramer v. Stewart: Memo to the *Daily Show* host: You’re a comedian!” *National Review Online*, 13 March 2009.
<http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=ODgwOGM1MGNhNzA5NjFiODhIMDg4NGEyYzhkODFIYjQ=>>.

²⁶² CNN, Jon Stewart Transcript.

²⁶³ Schmutz is Yiddish for an unpleasant substance.

The laughter that ensues stems from the tendentious act of making a rigid person who is used to being dominant or in control look surprised and messy. It is a subversive act. By seducing the audience with humor, the perpetrator produces some evidence that the audience and public opinion are on his side.

The fool's persona is a protection of sort from retribution. In the grander scheme, the person in power finds himself almost powerless. It would be foolish and actually lower his public standing to prosecute a fool who throws a pie the way he would an anarchist who throws a bomb or a journalist who publishes seditious libel.

There also is a clever use of Yiddish. Despite a rich culture replete with comedic talent, Yiddish speakers in the United States are often identified with Eastern European immigrants and unfortunately marginalized in some quarters.

Jewish culture honed its historic and comedic voice during centuries of living in the margins of Eastern Europe and Russia. At medieval wedding ceremonies, *badchonim* and *marshallikim* enjoyed license – well before Howard Cosell – to “tell it like it is.” At wedding banquets, while guests broke bread, these ceremonial figures cracked jokes; on other occasions, rabbis engaged in *sihat hullin*, or “light talk,” as they expounded the law. Rabbi Dovidl of Dinov, for example defended this tradition against critics on the grounds that all humorous stories contain God's truth.²⁶⁴

During the mid-twentieth century, as burlesque and vaudeville declined, a generation of legendary Jewish entertainers honed their craft doing stand-up routines at

²⁶⁴ Joseph Dorinson and Joseph Boskin, “Radical and Ethnic Humor,” *Humor in America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 166; Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1948) 264; Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is With the People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), pp. 279-280; Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Atheneum, 1969) pp. 133, 198.

summer resorts in the Adirondak Mountains of New York, the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania and the Berkshires of New England, collectively known as “The Borsch Belt.” They included Joey Adams, Milton Berle, Red Buttons, Sid Caesar, Buddy Hackett, Alan King and Don Rickles. During the rest of the year, they built followings with regular appearances at comedy spots in Greenwich Village and the swanker dinner clubs in upper Manhattan. Stewart’s regular but finessed use of comedic Yiddish (he is Jewish) and his own New York comedy work base place him squarely in that tradition.

With the snake oil metaphor, Stewart shows himself to be a master of the Freudian technique of condensation and its offshoot, the Lippmann concept of the stereotype.

Snake oil is a traditional Chinese ointment used for joint pain. However, the phrase is used commonly as a derogatory term for a placebo sold as a miracle cure by a charlatan with a deliberate plan to swindle an innocent consumer. The snake oil peddler is a frequent and recognizable character in American cowboy movies. He generally is a vagabond with dubious morals who poses as an authoritative figure such as a doctor. In reality, he is a huckster who uses masterful hype to sell the product to hardworking, unsuspecting townspeople who put their hopes in his perceived power.

The metaphor is a condensed way of tarring Cramer with all the baggage a snake oil salesman has in our culture without directly attacking him. It’s a quick hit with a big payoff. That is how condensation works. Stewart, who already had marginalized himself as the fool, used the snake oil metaphor to bring Cramer, the authority figure, down to his level by defining them together as similar marginal characters. It’s no loss

for Stewart, who already is marginalized, but it's a big loss for Cramer, because it strikes at the heart of what gives journalists their authority: credibility.

As the Freudian schema notes, the third party (the audience) is waiting to see Cramer's reaction. And the brilliance of tendentious humor is that Stewart has placed Cramer in an untenable situation. If Cramer accepts the metaphor, he loses credibility through self-admission. If he disputes it, he loses credibility because that reinforces the stereotype that he is a charlatan posing as an authority figure. The paradigm inevitably enhances Stewart's credibility as a truth teller and shows Cramer to possess the traits of the snake oil salesman: someone who intentionally holds himself out to the public as something he isn't.

Lippmann's writings on stereotypes and their relation to the joke process help explain why stereotypes are often a vehicle in tendentious jokes - and why tendentious jokes are often a vehicle to sway public opinion.

Lippmann pushes away from Freud when he writes that Freudians assume that if internal derangements could be straightened out, there would be little or no confusion about what is obviously the norm.²⁶⁵ He notes that psychoanalysts almost always assume that the environment is knowable or at least bearable, but that clashes with his ideas.

Lippmann takes the position that public opinion deals with indirect, unseen and puzzling facts, and there is nothing obvious about them - and this is the problem of public opinion. Instead of taking for granted an environment that is readily known, the

²⁶⁵ Lippmann, 17.

social analyst is most concerned in studying how the larger political environment is conceived and how it can be conceived more successfully.

The psychoanalyst examines the adjustment to an X, called by him the environment; the social analysts examines the X called by him the pseudoenvironment.²⁶⁶

But the core of Lippman's work with the pseudoenvironment returns to the condensation principle appropriated by Freud. Lippmann is looking for a way to understand how people can relate to persons, places and events they have never met, seen or experienced firsthand. He finds in psychology the concept of a mind's eye, a mental construction of reality, and he labels it (in a context different than it often is used today) the "stereotype." And this "stereotype" eventually becomes a key part of his – and much later from a different perspective, Gitlin's – journalistic critique.

Lippmann famously argued that the only feeling anyone can have about a person he does not know firsthand or an event he does not experience is the feeling spawned by his mental image of that person or event.²⁶⁷ He takes the position that even sophisticated and educated persons can react as strongly to fiction as they do to reality, and in many cases a person (Freud would more specifically say the person's unconscious) helps create the fiction at hand.

It is that fictional representation, the pseudoenvironment sometimes referred to as a mind's eye, which slips between a person and a person's environment and

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Lippmann, 9.

condenses people, places and events into something familiar so the person can instantly recognize or respond to them. He writes:

For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it.²⁶⁸

Lippmann contends that the images in our heads – this pseudoenvironment that employs widespread stereotypes – acts as a holding place for images thrust on us by mass media. Since we aren't born with them, this is how Lippman explains their presence in our intellectual and emotional lives.

Lippmann famously writes: "We don't see then define, we define then we see."²⁶⁹ Lippmann argues that these stereotypes – these quick condensed mental interpretations we make – have real consequences. In this case, a person may run away from the black man carrying the bat, or that person actually may run toward him, seeking his autograph.

Lippmann's appropriates condensation as an essential element for the stereotype, just as Freud uses it as an essential element of the joke. In fact, many jokes are based – some offensively – on stereotypes.

It's important to note that Lippmann was motivated in large part by the perpetual fear many have of mass media being used for propaganda. He concludes that effective propaganda is based simply on manipulating the pseudoenvironment, the way

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 11.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, xii

a person sees the world, which brings us full circle to the similarities between a tendentious joke and propaganda, both of which are designed to sway public opinion.

Stewart uses the metaphor of the snake oil salesman cleverly to bring the full weight of a classic American stereotype, whose effectiveness can be traced to the Freudian concept of condensation, to bear on Cramer. He does so within the dynamic of tendentious humor, which Freud argues seduces a third party into joining with the joke's author against the object of the joke. Lippmann's assertion that pseudoreality acts as an interpretive filter to influence how the object (in this case Cramer) is seen then defined clearly is in play. Cramer the professional journalist is framed as the disingenuous huckster whose credibility is in question, while Stewart, the professional jokester escapes as a truth-teller with his credibility enhanced. The question remains: Is Stewart's work journalism or is this comedy?

Mainstream media took Stewart's work seriously enough that it generated a national round of reports by news organizations and commentary by pundits and bloggers. That qualifies it as a news event, but that does not necessarily mean Stewart's work was journalism. In fact, under longstanding, unwritten journalistic mores, journalists report the news, they don't create it. Traditional news reporters work hard to stay removed from issues they cover to avoid the appearance that their work would be tainted to favor their own interests.

It is almost impossible to make the case that Stewart is a news reporter. He makes no pretense that his work uncovers new factual information. But journalism isn't limited to news reporters. Opinion writers whose work centers on interpreting facts, also

are considered journalists, and Stewart clearly is offering opinions and interpreting what he considers salient enough to transcend his typical schtick.

The methods that serve to make people comic include putting them in a comic situation, mimicry, disguise, unmasking, caricature, parody, travesty and so on. It is obvious that these techniques can be used to serve hostile and tendentious purposes.

Once can make a person comic in order to make him become contemptible, to deprive him of his claim to dignity and authority. But even if such an intention habitually underlies making people commit, this need not be the meaning of what is comic spontaneously.

CHAPTER 6

RESTORATION OF SANITY

Three days before the most massive midterm upheaval in a modern Congressional election, Jon Stewart faced roughly a quarter million Americans on the National Mall and called for a “restoration of sanity” in our political discourse.

He didn't ask them to vote Democrat, to support President Barack Obama or even to participate in the electoral process. He cracked jokes, offered skits – some with celebrities, others without them – and gave awards to private citizens. The three-hour version of his nightly show (as he described it beforehand) ended with a vocal love-fest featuring Tony Bennett, Sheryl Crow, Kid Rock, Mavis Staples, Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens), and others singing “I’ll Take You There.”

Just before that, in a brief statement to the crowd on the mall, to those at simulcast events in other parts of the country, and to the estimated 2 million viewers watching on The Comedy Central Network, Stewart discussed why he hosted the event. He said the rally wasn’t meant to be a forum for some Americans “to look down their noses” at others with strong religious convictions or different political beliefs. It wasn’t meant to pit Americans who lived on the East and West coasts or in urban areas against those from the South, Midwest, mountain states or rural communities. He made it clear that the humor he and others used wasn’t meant to gloss over challenges that face America

and fears those challenges raise. Stewart said the purpose of the event was to show how news media that cover national politics have not only failed to help Americans solve those challenges, but to show they have added to them:

We live now in hard times, not end times, and we can have animus and not be enemies. But unfortunately, one of our main tools in delineating the two broke. The country's 24-hour political pundit perpetual panic conflict-onator did not cause our problems, but its existence makes solving them that much harder.²⁷⁰

In three hours on a custom-built stage with the Capitol dome as a backdrop, Stewart's career took another great leap. Two days earlier, as anticipation built for the rally, he scored a coup in journalistic terms when he interviewed Obama on his cable TV show. In the hours and days after the rally, he found himself the object of criticism from journalists, liberal bloggers and the host of another high-profile cable show built around political humor. All of them were unhappy with the message they thought rally sent, but that didn't eclipse the significance of the rally itself.

The event moved Stewart from the ranks of popular TV personality into an elite group of public figures who can draw more than 200,000 people to the National Mall, a symbolic center of American democracy. It was the largest live audience of his career. It also offered a glimpse beyond faceless demographics (compiled for ratings and network marketing) into who Stewart's most loyal followers are and what motivates them. People who traveled to the rally chose not to stay in their communities and work for a candidate or political party on the final weekend before a critical national election. Instead, they chose to connect to our national political process by traveling to

²⁷⁰ Jon Stewart, "Jon Stewart's 'Rally to Restore Sanity' closing speech (video)" Digital Journal <http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/299668#ixzz187P9ulPz>

Washington, D.C., and being part of the audience for Stewart's rally. The people there that day were, in political terms, Stewart's base.

Ethnographic work over four days that included observation of the preparations for the rally, the rally itself, and interviews with more than 70 people from at least 16 states and the District of Columbia gives fresh insight into who is on the demand side of the increasingly complex relationship between journalism, public affairs and Americans who look to comedians to understand what is happening in national politics.

In some elections, people check out. They get demoralized and effectively boycott the process. The people at Stewart's rally weren't checking out; they were checking in. Most were frustrated and many were alienated from the political establishment and the journalists who are supposed to report on it, but almost all who were interviewed for this project were eager – some desperate – to reconnect. They wanted to be involved in the process, and they wanted the process to work.

The idea embodied by the phrase “restore sanity” appealed to a large number of those at the rally. It was the immediate answer many gave when asked why they were there. It meant a combination of things they wanted to see in the politicians they elect and the news organizations who report on them. People said they would like to see politicians and the media:

- tone down harsh inflammatory rhetoric;
- frame news more broadly and less in terms of two extremes in conflict; and
- choose news stories that reflected things that are actually happening in their local communities or reflect situations they recognize firsthand.

They also wanted to see evidence that politicians were willing to work together – regardless of party affiliation – instead of being against something just because the other party supported it.

Oprah Winfrey lent her support to the event by appearing spontaneously on Stewart's show a few weeks earlier. She announced that she would pay the travel and lodging expenses for everyone in the studio audience that night to attend it. A man in his twenties who came courtesy of Winfrey was at the mall the day before the rally watching the final preparations being put in place. He explained:

I'm hoping to see a bit of humor and a bit of hope that there are enough people around the country willing to progress a little bit ... I'm hoping for cross partisan. I don't really consider myself Democrat or Republican. I think of myself as more a progressive and trying to figure out how to change the country hopefully for the better.

A retired couple from San Francisco flew to D.C. for the rally and came to the National Mall the day before the event. They said that seven or eight passengers on the plane discovered in casual conversation they all were coming for the event, and they spent much of the trip discussing it and exchanging contact information on the plane. They said they vote regularly but that neither has been involved in something like this since they participated in peace marches during the 1960s. The woman said:

It's sort of a counter message to the Tea Party and to Fox News. Democrats do it too, and to the fringe left, also. There is so much lying and so much distortion. Is Obama a Muslim? Is he an American? For Christ's sake. And so I think a whole lot of people are coming here to testify *en masse* that this is not necessarily the way we need to conduct dialog.

More than a dozen satellite rallies were organized in major cities in thirteen states.²⁷¹ Stewart and Colbert created webpages and special discussion boards and forums for the rally on the Comedy Central website. They also took advantage of social networking sites such as Facebook, which organizers of the satellite rallies also used to provide information and gauge interest. Attendance varied at the satellite rallies; most counts were unofficial or by organizers who reported attendance between several hundred and several thousand.²⁷²

One of the larger satellite events took place in Austin, Texas, a Democratic Party stronghold in a largely conservative state. Unlike the national event, the rally at the Texas Capitol had a distinctly partisan feel. Its six speakers included Austin's mayor, state senator and congressman, all of whom are active, vocal and progressive Democrats. Organizers of the Austin event stayed closer to the national theme by crafting a special slogan: "Everything is bigger in Texas, but we're willing to take it down a notch."²⁷³

A Central Texas woman in her 50s who is a cancer survivor and who later lost her eyesight to an unrelated condition traveled 45 miles from the small town where she lives to attend the Austin event. A high school friend talked her into it and drove her there. The woman said that she was encouraged by meeting so many Democrats. (Texas

²⁷¹ The website www.rallymao.com shows photographs and links to news reports on events in: Chicago, Atlanta, St. Louis, San Francisco, Eugene, Honolulu, Seattle, Austin, Denver, Salt Lake city, Las Vegas, Las Angeles and Minneapolis.

²⁷² St. Louis had 1,000 attendees, according to *St/Today.com*; Austin had 5,700 attendees, according to the *American-Statesman*; and Honolulu had 350, according to the *Star-Advertiser*.

²⁷³ Rally to Restore Sanity Austin. <<http://www.restoresanityaustin.com>>

hasn't elected a Democrat to statewide office in fifteen years.) "It was great to finally be among people who were for more than they were against," she said. She said that she went to the event to discuss and learn more about health care and that she told her story about losing her job, her problems with health insurance and going on disability to anyone who would listen - - and that people genuinely took time to hear her.

That was the best part of the rally. Being among like-minded people was exactly what I needed. I'd been living lost and alone in the Twilight Zone, a time in space where nothing makes sense, since 2008. The rally not only restored my own sanity but it also restored my faith in humanity - not to mention America.²⁷⁴

* * *

To fully understand the scope, focus and message of the rally and its satellite events, it's necessary to know how other events conspired to create and perhaps inadvertently shape them. As noted in Chapter 5, Stewart has regularly criticized the tone that dominates cable news and the political discussion it shapes. He's followed the now-famous plea he made on *Crossfire* to "stop hurting America" with ongoing criticism of conservative commentators on Fox News such as Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly and of liberal commentators on MSNBC, including Chris Matthews and Keith Olbermann.

Until Beck's show ended this year, no one had been a more consistent target of Stewart's work than he had been. The differences between the two men are pronounced. Both have said that associations, relationships and early life experiences such as family

²⁷⁴ e-mail interview with Vicki Stockard Phipps. 13 Dec. 2010.

culture, education and the geographic upbringing shaped their work ethic and world view. Stewart's values run typically urbane and liberal, while Beck's favor ultra-conservative politics and Christian dogma.

Stewart was born in Manhattan and went to high school in New Jersey. He is Jewish, and his father was a physics professor. He attended a prestigious college in Virginia, but other than that has lived his whole life in the New York area.

Beck was born and grew-up in rural Washington state. He was reared Catholic and later converted to Mormon. His father owned a small business. Beck went to work in radio immediately after high school and moved around the country, living in Utah, Texas, Florida before moving to Connecticut to work in New York.

Neither has any journalistic education or formal training in that profession. Stewart is a stand-up comedian and satirist, with a significant body of work as an entertainer. Only his most recent and successful work has focused on American politics and media. Beck is an author, commentator and entrepreneur, whose professional roots can be traced to off-color jokes, pranks and other antics on commercial drive-time radio.

Other differences are more intangible.

Stewart and Beck are more than a liberal and a conservative who go on television and talk about the same politics from opposing positions. They are not versions of the same paradigm "from the left" and "from the right" as the old *Crossfire* saying went.

Stewart is sarcastic and ironic. His world view is slightly indignant. He makes his living pointing fingers at absurdity. Stewart shows his audience things that make them both mad and tells them the people who created those circumstances are liars and bull-shitters. He establishes his rapport by offering - - and that he is helping them see that along with him by unmasking their stupidity.

Beck is alarmist and incendiary. His world view is conspiratorial. He makes his living operating a fear-management machine. Beck tells his audience they have been deceived - - but he can connect the dots in a way that will help them find their way through that deception to a surprising new truth.

In short, Stewart's humor reduces anxiety. Beck's demagoguery stokes resentment.

Good satire is based on facts, and so is good commentary. A key difference comes with what the practitioner layers on the facts and how he presents them. Satirists filter their views indirectly through the comedy they create, which often involves the use of irony, double-entendre and other literary and rhetorical devices. Commentators deliver their views forthright and advocate for social and political issues through direct pleas or statements. No one takes satire at face value. Commentary demands it.

Another key difference between Stewart and Beck is the expectation of measured preparation and veracity held by their respective audiences. Satirists prepare and refine material, but many of them also practice more traditional comedy, especially those such as Stewart who come from a stand-up tradition. Stand-up comedy often includes the practice of extemporaneous speaking. Stand-up comedians often don't

know how their material will be received until they test it in venues like small comedy clubs. When it isn't well received (or "bombs") they drop it from their act rather than repeat it in a larger venue. Audiences understand this process and can be sympathetic to it.

Audiences for news analysis and commentary traditionally have had much different expectations around facts, truth and accuracy. So have professionals who consider themselves journalists. Audiences count on reporters and commentators to adhere to an ethos of accuracy and precision. They want to take the narratives they are given at face value. Audiences give commentators license to interpret, but not to mislead.

So, if Beck is inflammatory, misleading, and at times outright loony in a way that borders on gross irresponsibility - as his critics claim - what accounts for his following?

Nielsen data show that Beck's television audience mirrors the audiences that follow other FOX hosts, such as Bill O'Reilly.²⁷⁵ As noted earlier (Chapter 3), that means compared to Stewart's audience it is: significantly older, less likely to have a college degree, lower in median income and less likely to work in a white collar job. Surveys show that this group is also the group most likely to be strongly motivated by concerns about the economy and distrust of government, the same issues that supporters of the Tea Party site as their motivations.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Aaron Barnhart, "Glenn Beck's youth problem," *The Kansas City Star*, 15 March 2011.

Beck delivers his commentary in a way that allows the audience to see him as someone with positive distinguishing characteristics. He is consistent, unique, zealous and personal.²⁷⁷

Consistent. Beck's message is relatively narrow, and it is consistently extreme. It is tightly focused to resonate with a specific audience that believes groups of people with different views than theirs (usually more politically liberal, but sometimes nonChristian, too) are dangerous. And he is unapologetic about it. It's how he conveys a moral compass - - his way to show unwavering character. Latino immigrants, Muslims, disadvantaged American racial minorities and white progressives routinely find themselves the target of outrageous, unfounded and mean-spirited allegations. He called Obama "a racist" with "a deep-seated hatred for white people."²⁷⁸ He labeled Hurricane Katrina victims "scumbags."²⁷⁹ He's accused Al Gore of creating a new "Hitler Youth" by promoting environmental awareness.²⁸⁰ And when Keith Ellison, a Muslim, was elected to Congress in 2006 from Minnesota, Beck asked him onto his show and said to

²⁷⁶ Jon Cohen and Jennifer Agiesta, "What Motivates the Tea Party," Behind the Numbers Blog, *The Washington Post*, 5 May 2010.

²⁷⁷ Ideas and the writing in this section are my own. I came across this site during routine research for contextual descriptions of Beck's work. I agreed with some and disagreed with other parts. I'm including this footnote out of an abundance of caution. Eugene, "The 10 ingredients to Glenn Beck's Success Recipe" 25 March 2011. <<http://www.realityburst.com/the-10-ingredients-to-glenn-becks-success-recipe>.>

²⁷⁸ Today, "Fox News host says Obama is a racist," Associated Press 3 Aug. 2009. <<http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/32197648/ns/today-entertainment/>>

²⁷⁹ *Media Matters for America*, "Glenn Beck called hurricane survivors in New Orleans 'scumbags,' said he 'hates' 9-11 families," 9 Sept. 2005.

²⁸⁰ Glenn Beck, *The Glenn Beck Program*, 1 May 2007.

him, “Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies... That's the way I feel, and I think a lot of Americans will feel that way.”²⁸¹

Unique. Beck doesn't push other people's ideas. His conspiracies are his own, and he packages them to convince his followers that they are directly relevant to their lives. His stock-and-trade in their eyes is his unique ability to connect the dots in these events and relationships that he brings to their attention. And he's conditioned his audience to think they won't get this information anywhere else. It's his insider baseball. It's how he conveys the idea that he is intelligent. He told his audience in January that the riots in Egypt had nothing to do with politics. “This is about world denomination(sic),” he said. In this theory, he predicted a collusion between “a Muslim caliphate,” China and Russia that would divide and control the entire Eastern Hemisphere.²⁸² The result of course was an uncertain future for the United States in the global economy.

Zealous. Beck doesn't make half-hearted or qualified claims. He is unequivocal, never wishy-washy. The passion he draws on when he delivers his ideas is how he conveys sincerity. You may disagree with him, but you have to agree that he holds his beliefs dearly. His zeal is often matched by the positive responses from people in his audience and the negative responses from people outside his audience who are familiar with his work. Few who have heard him speak or watched his show have no opinion

²⁸¹ *Media Matters for America*, “CNN's Beck to first-ever Muslim congressman: “[What I feel like saying is, 'Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies' ” 15 Nov. 2006.

²⁸² Brad Knickerbocker, “Why is Glenn Beck freaking out over Egypt and a Caliphate,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 Feb. 2011.

about him. He's stated that "the most used phrase in my administration if I were to be President would be 'What the hell do you mean we're out of missiles?'"²⁸³ He's also proposed disposing of Guantanamo detainees by shooting them in the head.²⁸⁴

Personal. Beck doesn't shy away from telling his audience details about his personal life most hosts would consider private or inappropriate for widespread discussion. Beck's peers typically or off-handedly may mention their favorite sports teams or an occasional cultural event they enjoyed. Beck openly discusses his drug addiction and alcoholism. Presenting his flaws and discussing events he has overcome in life, such as his mother's suicide, is how Beck conveys his humanity. He convinces his audience he is everyman, just like them. He once told his radio audience: "You know who's going to save this country? Alcoholics. Yeah. Yeah, winos, lushes. Drug addicts. That's who's going to save this country. Because for those of us who are winos and in recovery, we know how this game works."²⁸⁵ It's even included it in the bio on his corporate site glennbeck.com. He's also explained to his audience how he is preparing his own family for a global disaster he believes is imminent.²⁸⁶

In sum, Beck delivers commentary in a nontraditional way that effectively ties him to his audience on two levels. On one hand, he connects with them through shared Christian and far-right views. On the other, he defines himself as having a moral

²⁸³ Stephen Lendman, "Glenn Beck's Demagoguery, Right Wing Extremism and Racism," *Global Research Canada*. 3 May 2011.

²⁸⁴ Lendman.

²⁸⁵ Glenn Beck, "Alcoholics will save America," 1 October 2008. <<http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/15903/>>

²⁸⁶ Lendman.

compass (his consistency), being intelligent (his uniqueness), being sincere (zealous), and having a life that resembles theirs (personal).

When Beck launched his 9/12 project, designed to remind Americans how united they were the day after the attacks on the World Trade Center, Stewart responded with his 11/3 project to tie Beck's appendectomy to a number of wacky conspiracy theories. Stewart embarrassed Beck last summer with video footage that showed his claim that Fox News was the only media outlet to air unsettling video of IDF soldiers being beaten by passengers on a Turkish flotilla to be blatantly false. But in a decade of comedy and parody perhaps the most intense and effective single skit that Stewart has offered came last spring at Beck's expense.

Stewart devoted the final twenty minutes of his March 18 show to a brutal parody of Beck. He opened the segment with a clip of Beck denouncing progressive politics as a "cancer in America" that is "destroying our Constitution" and characterizing progressives as people who "want to control every aspect of your life." Stewart donned Beck's trademark glasses and used Beck's trademark chalkboard to diagram a host of outrageous conspiracy theories that included a linear diagram designed to show big government taking America down a path of creeping communism and photos of Jesus Christ whom he morphed into a bearded Ayatollah. He unmasked a cryptic paradigm that showed Bert from Sesame Street to be Adolph Hitler and distilled Beck's essence into a zen that alleged: "If you subscribe to an idea, you also subscribe to that idea's ideology and to every possible negative consequence that that ideology even remotely

implies when you carry it to absurd extremes.” Stewart closed by feigning tears and telling the audience, “I’m sorry. I promised myself that I would cry.”

Videos and edited clips of the skit went instantly viral on YouTube. The episode was widely discussed by liberal bloggers and reported by corporate media, including the *Huffington Post*, MSNBC, *New York Magazine* and the *New York Times*. So, when Stewart announced his rally on Sept. 16, less than three weeks after Beck’s event, national media and many Americans saw it as a challenge or competing rally.

The announcement, which feigned spontaneity, actually was highly scripted. “We will gather on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., A Million Moderates March... to send a message to our leaders and to our national media that says ‘We are here! We are only here until 6 because we have a sitter.’ A clarion call for rationality!”

Colbert, who satirizes the type of bombastic cable television pundit Stewart abhors, had been promising for weeks to “out-announce” Stewart. So, in the middle of Stewart’s presentation, Colbert appeared from his own studio by remote feed (as cable hosts often do as a lead in to the next show) to interrupt Stewart’s announcement. It was vintage Colbert: announcing that he would announce his own rally on his show immediately following Stewart.

I’m sorry Jon Stewart, but I will not take it down a notch. I will notch it up a skosh. Jon Stewart is holding a rally in Washington, D.C., to promote reasonableness? Need I point out that ‘reason’ is one letter away from ‘treason’? Shame on you, Jon Stewart. American cannot afford a Rally to Restore Sanity in the middle of a recession. Did you even consider how many panic-related jobs that might cost those of us in the fear- industrial complex?

Later that night on *The Colbert Report*, Stewart staged his own interruption.

Their brief banter reinforced the frame they wanted to set for the events and the roles the two would play.

STEWART. I heard about your March to Keep Fear Alive, Stephen Colbert.

COLBERT. Oh, are you *scared*, Jon?

STEWART. Reasonably concerned.

COLBERT. People should definitely book their hotel rooms now, or their children might turn gay.

STEWART. No, they should book their rooms now because it will be more difficult to get a good room if you wait

COLBERT. Damn your reasonableness.

Within hours, more than 34,000 people had pledged on Facebook to attend the two rallies. Others began planning simultaneous events in U.S. cities and some even internationally.²⁸⁷ Eventually, the two merged into a joint happening, which the Stewart-Colbert team renamed “The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear.” An official website (www.rallytorestoresanity.com) offered downloads of the logo and posters featuring stylized stencil head shots of Stewart and Colbert drawn to resemble the iconic Shepard Fairey “Hope” poster associated with the 2008 Obama campaign.

To further clarify the tone he was hoping to achieve (or the message was hoping to send), Stewart suggested some slogans he’d like people to use for signs they bring to

²⁸⁷ Agence France-Presse, “US Comics Unveil Dueling DC Political Rallies” 17 Sept. 2010.
<<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gkOsOs61eFqq5znyHyVThYNAGTDw>>

his rally. They included: “I disagree with you, but I’m pretty sure you’re not Hitler” and “I am not afraid of Muslims, Tea Partiers, Socialists, Immigrants, Gun Owners or gays. But I am scared of spiders.”

Stewart insisted in the weeks leading to the event that it was not designed to be a response to Beck’s rally. “I very much wanted to avoid the idea that (it) would be a reaction to him 'cause I don't think that'd be fair to him, and it's not meant to ridicule activism or the Tea Party movement or religious people," he told NPR’s Terry Gross in an interview on Sept. 29 at the 92nd Street Y.²⁸⁸ He surprised many in the audience that day when he said his work is not that different from Beck’s. “(He is offering) a reaction to what he feels like is the news and so are we. We actually share quite a bit in common. Not point of view necessarily, but reason for being. We’re both in some ways an op-ed,” Stewart said. Eventually, Gross was able to get Stewart to say what he objects to in Beck’s work:

The beautiful thing about what he does is, it's very difficult to argue with his facts. It's the conclusions [that are problematic]. ... It's that slippery slope. ... So what (he does) is...just grab together facts and put them together and then do a grab bag of conclusions. Everything is discovered as evidence of secret plots, of secret things that could be occurring.

Beck’s rally drew roughly 85,000 people, according to an estimate by AirPhotosLive.com, a company that CBS commissioned to count the crowd at both events. It took place at the Lincoln Memorial one day from the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s 1963 march, which culminated there with his historic “I Have A

²⁸⁸ Terry Gross, “Jon Stewart: The Most Trusted Name in Fake News,” National Public Radio, 4 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130321994>>

Dream” speech. Beck said he did not intend to choose the anniversary for his rally and credited “divine providence” for the coincidence.²⁸⁹

I believe this is a reason (the date was chosen), because whites don’t own the Founding Fathers. Whites don’t own Abraham Lincoln. Blacks don’t own Martin Luther King. Humans, humans embrace their ideas or reject their ideas. Too many are rejecting the Founders’ ideas. Too many have forgotten Abraham Lincoln’s ideas, and far too many have either gotten just lazy or they have purposely distorted Martin Luther King’s ideas.

A number of civil rights leaders questioned Beck’s explanation, citing a record of racially inflammatory statements he has made. As a guest commentator in 2009 on a Fox News political show, Beck claimed Obama harbors “a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture.” On his own show this year, he said, “I beg you look for the words social justice or economic justice on your church Web site. If you can find it, run as fast as you can.” Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League, told CBS that Beck’s rally was “an effort to embarrass and poke a finger in the eye of the civil rights community because Glenn Beck and his public utterances don’t necessarily demonstrate a consistency with the vision of King.”²⁹⁰

Beck claimed his rally was nonpartisan (before Stewart did the same), despite the fact that his chief attraction was Sarah Palin, the 2008 Republican vice presidential nominee and potential presidential candidate in 2012. Palin, who drew criticism in 2008 for racially inflammatory comments at her rallies, told the crowd that calls to transform the country weren’t enough. “We must restore American and restore her honor,” she

²⁸⁹ DeNeen Brown, “Glenn Beck Rally Continues to Spur Controversy,” CBS News/washingtonpost.com, 17 Aug. 2010.

²⁹⁰ Brown.

said in remarks that mirrored the name of the rally.²⁹¹ She and Beck repeatedly referred to the Founding Fathers, and both cited King, who often tempered his political remarks with Christian ideals.

Beck's remarks carried a distinctively religious overtone that prompted the Associated Press to liken them to those of an evangelical preacher. He said, "Something beyond imagination is happening, American today begins to turn back to God." He encouraged members of his audience to recognize their place in regard to their creator. "Realize that he is our king. He is the one who guides and directs our life and protects us." And he asked them to pray more. "I ask not only if you would pray on your knees, but pray on your knees but with your door open for your children to see."²⁹²

It was all too much for the Rev. Al Sharpton, who staged a counter rally that day at a nearby high school. Sharpton led several thousand civil rights activists on a three-mile trek to the Tidal Basin, which is near the Lincoln Memorial and borders a site where a monument to King is set for construction.

Sharpton pointed to aspects of Beck's rally that he saw as hypocritical, especially the frames that reflected on the work of King and the modern American civil rights movement. He noted that Beck routinely champions anti-government themes, while King's Washington march and the speech at the Lincoln Memorial actually appealed to the federal government to increase its work to ensure civil rights and economic opportunity. Sharpton also challenged the sincerity of Beck's followers in the area of

²⁹¹ Nafeesa Syeed and Phillip Elliott, "Beck: Help Us Restore Traditional American Values," Associated Press Writers for ABC News, 29 Aug. 2010.

²⁹² Ibid.

equality for African-Americans, whose work for civil rights often led white conservatives to brand them as dangerous malcontents. “The folks who used to criticize us for marching are trying to have a march themselves,” he said.²⁹³

The day before the Rally to Restore Sanity, a man from Houston with college-age children came to the mall to watch the preparations. He said he and his wife decided to come to the event because the type of rhetoric Beck pushes and the responses it draws from Sharpton and other liberals have left them feeling alienated from national politics.

You got your Glenn Becks and all the fear and Karl Rove on the right (preaching) fear, fear, fear. And you got the other side, the left side going, “They’re wrong. They’re wrong. They’re wrong. You know and it doesn’t seem like nether the left nor the right want to come together. This rally here I see as one of those things saying OK America take it down a notch. You guys need to listen. The right needs to listen. The left needs to you know. As a country we can’t move ahead without people listening and talking and doing what is best for the country.

The Rally

Roughly 10,000 people boarded “Sanity Buses” shortly after dawn Saturday morning at Citi Field in Flushing, N.Y., and made the trip to D.C.²⁹⁴ It was free transportation courtesy of the *Huffington Post*, a liberal website co-founded by Arianna Huffington.²⁹⁵ Other websites and college groups also organized bus trips. Amtrak trains between New York City and Washington, D.C., were largely sold out Saturday

²⁹³ Ibid

²⁹⁴ Rally to Restore Sanity Live Video Updates From The Rally in DC. *The Huffington Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/30/rally-for-sanity-video-live-jon-stewart_n_776433.html

²⁹⁵ Huffington appeared on *The Daily Show* on Sept. 28 and promised free transportation to anyone who wanted to go to the event. At that point, about 170,000 people had indicated on Facebook they were planning to go. Eventually the project was scaled back and deadlines for registration made it tougher than simply showing up that morning to receive a free seat.

morning. Travelers at Penn Station in New York were carrying signs; one had an American flag affixed to his backpack.²⁹⁶ Some who drove in from Virginia and Maryland said they arranged car-pools with friends and family members.

The “day trip” that tens of thousands of people made from states in the Northeast, Midwest and South coupled with thousands who flew or drove to D.C. for the weekend shows the devoted following Stewart and Colbert have built. Since Colbert left *The Daily Show* in 2005 to launch his back-to-back spin-off, the two have provided a one-two punch of satire and comedic punditry four nights a week that many Americans see as a legitimate check on the federal government and a national media whose public trust has hit near record lows.²⁹⁷ Despite the clear liberal bent to their work, the two comedians have earned the trust of a loyal fan base and respect from a circle of influence that includes many of the politicians and journalists they criticize.

A man in his forties from North Carolina said he arrived at the National Mall at 5 a.m., when the temperature was about 40 degrees. He estimated between 400 and 500 people already were there. His teenage son carried a sign that poked fun at the type of rhetoric commonly found at partisan rallies. It read: “Fight illegal migration: demand Canadian geese show us their papers.”²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Dave Itzkoff, “Live Blog: At the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear,” *The Caucus: The Politics and Government Blog of The New York Times*, 30 Oct. 2010.

²⁹⁷ A Gallup Poll released on Aug. 13 showed Americans continue to express near-record low confidence in newspapers and television news - - with no more than 25 percent of Americans saying they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in either. These views have hardly budged since falling more than 10 percent from 2003 to 2007.

²⁹⁸ Itzkoff.

Tens of thousands of spectators were at the mall by 8 a.m. The crowd then and through the day represented a wide range of age groups. Stewart and Colbert get a lot of attention because surveys show a higher rate of 18-29 year olds get political information from their programs than do other age demographics. Yet, only about one in three regular viewers of *The Daily Show* is between the ages of 18 and 34, according to the Nielsen Company.

Nonetheless, the distinct energy of college-age and young adults was visible. Before Stewart, Colbert or their staffs, began to talk publicly about the possibility of a rally, members of the open-source social news site *Reddit* were independently discussing the prospect of a Colbert-led rally. That group raised more than \$500,000 from people who use the *Reddit* to help launch what they were calling the "Restoring Truthiness" rally.²⁹⁹ Thousands of people known as Redditors traveled to D.C. for the actual event. Three college-age men who were at the mall by 9 a.m. on Saturday said they worked with *Reddit* to raise donations from 180,000 college students. They were excited to be part of an online community that was a driving force behind what they saw as an historic event.³⁰⁰ They said they want to see their generation make a statement about the way politics are discussed in America. One explained: "It seems like everyone is extreme and extreme views are heard and not everyday ordinary people... Extreme is what is interesting and is what people are looking to even if it is not what they believe."

²⁹⁹ Redit.com "Restoring Truthiness," <http://www.reddit.com/r/ColbertRally/search?q=rally+%24500%2C000>

³⁰⁰ At a news conference after the rally, Colbert acknowledged that Reddit played a role in the eventual decision to have the rally.

The stage, built near 4th Street NW, faced west, and the Park Service cordoned off the area between Madison and Jefferson drives that stretched to 12th Street NW. That set the official area for the rally, which covered: East Seaton Park West Seaton Park, Henry Park and L' Enfant Square Park. However, huge overflows extended into the areas surrounding the Smithsonian Institution and the National Museum of Natural History.

Claims by Stewart and Colbert that the rally was not intended to be an overtly political event didn't stop the Democratic National Committee and Organizing for America, Obama's political organization, from trying to take advantage of the audience.³⁰¹ Those who arrived by bus and many who came by train were greeted by workers, staff and volunteers carrying sign-up sheets for canvassing efforts in districts across the country. They also invited participants to come to the DNC office, just a few blocks from the rally, and work for a phone bank operating there that day. Many Democrats, feeling pressure from speculation about massive Republican Congressional gains, saw the rally as a distraction on the final weekend before the election. They worried that the rally would draw people who might otherwise be canvassing neighborhoods and knocking on doors for Democratic candidates. But an OFA spokeswoman told the *New York Times*, "We think having people energized and enthusiastic in the final days before Election Day is great."

A high school teacher from Boston who identified as a Democrat volunteered for the event. She was stationed near the intersection of Pennsylvania and Constitution

³⁰¹ Michael Shear, "Democrats Recruit Volunteers outside Stewart-Colbert Rally," *The New York Times*, 30 Oct. 2010.

avenues at 9 a.m. directing people to the 7th Street entrance, restroom facilities and other areas. She drove to D.C. with friends the previous evening and got a red heart-shaped tattoo “in honor of the rally.” She said that she watches Stewart because he gets to the truth behind political events without being overly confrontational or mean-spirited. She also said humor is an appropriate way to look at political events and doesn’t detract from their meaning.

When he talks he actually understands what you are thinking, because you kind of watch all these things and think they are ridiculous, and he points out the fact that they are ridiculous.

Vendors were set-up to take full advantage of the crowds. Stands with vintage political buttons and other keepsakes that often are found at state and national party conventions peppered the sidewalk along Constitution Avenue. A vender near 7th Street NW offered hundreds of lapel pins and buttons from the 1950s (Senator Robert Taft and President Harry Truman) and 1960s (“Pat Paulson for President ’68” and “Goldwater in ’63/ Hot Water in ’65”). His stock also included dozens from Ronald Reagan’s 1980 and 1980 campaigns, and a variety of buttons from more recent races won by Bill Clinton (1992 and 1996), George W. Bush (2000 and 2004) and Barack Obama (2008).

Yahoo! employees handed out cards that offered the opportunity to win free Yahoo! access to anyone willing to e-mail in photos and observations of the rally. Others with the entrepreneurial spirit were hawking flags, t-shirts, hand-held fans and towels - - all with the rally insignia that read “Team Fear.” Rally staff were at many of the entry points giving away lapel stickers with the image of the official rally poster reduced to 5x5 inch display.

Many came to the event carrying signs. Some were overtly political with liberal and pro-Democratic messages, such as: “Fear gives me a Boehner,” “Christine O’Donnell turned me into a NEWT,” and “Keep Fear Alive Vote Republican.” A number of signs targeted Beck, the Tea Party and Fox News. They included: “Don’t Let Glenn Beck tea bag our children,” “Fair and Balanced: How does that work?” and “Don’t Steep On Me.” Some were silly, such as: “Can we just get a bong” and “Don’t be a douche.” Many, however, attempted to capture the spirit of the day, which Stewart had suggested, by addressing the idea of sanity and reasonableness. An elderly lady carried a sign “Confused senior citizens for sanity.” Others read: “use your inside voice,” “TAKE IT OFF CAPS LOCK” and “somewhat irritated about extreme outrage.” A noticeable number contained some variation of “I understand your stance, and while I disagree I’m pretty sure you’re not a Nazi.”

The rally took place on Halloween weekend, and many came in costumes that captured the spirits of history, politics, the absurd and the ghoulish. A man in a devil costume carried a sign that read: “Obama isn’t the devil. I am.” A woman dressed as a witch and wore an O’Donnell mask. Many followed Colbert’s suggestion to come dressed as their fears, specifically “foreigners” and bears. Others came as wizards, wolves, gorillas, and Star Wars characters. There were bizarre outfits, such as a group of shirtless men painted blue from head to waist. And someone came as a birth control pill. There also were men dressed as Ben Franklin and Abraham Lincoln.

A college student dressed as a colonial gentleman said he sometimes watches Stewart but is a much greater fan of Colbert, because he likes the way Colbert spoofs

Fox News. He said, “The minute he came on, I fell in love with him. He is like one of the funniest people out there, and his stuff is funny and goofy, but it actually is smart and it hits home, and it has a greater point usually.” He said he came to the rally because he is concerned that American fiscal policy is moving in the wrong direction.

I want to see us go toward equality and more progressive taxation system and not backward, and what we have been doing in the past – tax cuts for wealthy people and ignoring like middle-class citizens like teachers and those people like that who have built this country up (is wrong). It’s not the wealthy who have built this country up and then trickle down to people below. That is not how it should work. So, I am here for the average citizens.

The rally was scheduled to begin at noon, but C-Span started priming TV viewers by 10 a.m. Producers turned the final fifteen minutes of *Washington Journal* into a call-in segment that focused on the event. People were asked to use phone lines based on how they identified themselves politically: Republican, Independent or Democrat.³⁰²

"Yes, sir -- I think it's going to be fantastic. I'm proud of them boys," said a man from Arkansas who called on the Democrat line.

"So these two comedians have got these thousands of people out there, which, by the way, journalists weren't supposed to be able to cover this, so I don't know how you guys are..." said a woman calling from California on the Republican line.

"I guess it's your First Amendment right to be out there to cover it, but they weren't issuing credentials to ... the conservative media. So people are out there thinking this is real. You've got a guy in a banana suit."

³⁰² Ibid

"The importance of this rally is that the country see that there are many real people that support reasonableness and civility," said a woman from Virginia calling on the Democrat line.

"I certainly support freedom of speech and the right of this group to meet today, but ... I do think the liberals and left show fascist leanings of shutting down anything that's independent of their own," said a man from upstate New York calling on the Republican line.

"I think it's about time somebody got together and did something about this," said a man from Florida who called on the independent line.

About the same time, the JumboTron screens positioned around the National Mall rally site began showing snippets of rally-related segments of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* from the previous weeks. Colbert was shown several times explaining the difference between "reason" and "treason." Also included were clips in which Arianna Huffington and Oprah Winfrey appeared on *The Daily Show* to announce they would lend financial support – and in doing so build buzz for the event – by paying travel expenses for people who might otherwise not attend. Replaying those narratives contributed to a feeling of nostalgia and to a sense of grand history many already felt about the event.

* * *

Here is a chronology drawn from firsthand observation of live events, Twitter feeds, and real-time Internet broadcasts and updates on Comedy Central, the *New York Times*, [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) and MSNBC.³⁰³

10:30 a.m. Luke Russert, son of the late Tim Russert, is standing on Third Street with the rally stage in the background. He reports there are a lot of people. "To give you New Yorkers a sense of what that is, that's twelve city blocks packed with people," he explains oddly, as if MSNBC reaches only New York. He says 200,000 people RSVP'd on Facebook, and if the crowd keeps pouring in at this pace the tally easily should reach that number.

10:55 a.m. A leaked schedule shows that musicians Jeff Tweedy, Mavis Staples and Sheryl Crow will be performing, and that actors Sam Waterston and Don Novello are slated to appear. A writer for *The Daily Show* is posting photos of behind-the-scenes preparations on Twitter. One shows correspondents Jason Jones and John Oliver playing outside a trailer - - with Jones giving Oliver a playful kiss on the cheek. Another shows Aasif Mandvi awkwardly trying to use his cell phone camera to take a picture of something.

11:15 a.m. Heather Smith, executive director of Rock the Vote, tells *The New York Times* the rally is an "unprecedented opportunity" to talk to young voters right before Election Day. "It's essentially the largest P.S.A. targeting young Americans for voting in a midterm election in history," she says, noting that some people who can't make it to Washington will be watching at home or attending satellite rallies in cities

³⁰³ This chronology was verified against blog posts on the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* websites. Some supplemental material from those blogs is included.

across the country. One of the largest satellite rallies, in Austin, Tex., had 5,000

RSVP's, she says.

11:26 a.m. TBD.com, a Washington-area news site, sets up a Flickr page, so people can upload photos of their favorite posters and signs. The first few show the crowd getting into the satirical spirit. A sign in one photo reads: "My wife thinks I'm walking the Appalachian Trail." Another picture shows a man dressed as an eighteenth-century British soldier carrying a sign that reads: "Repeal the Third Amendment."

11:30 a.m. Thousands of people are pouring into the National Mall near the Seventh Street entrance. Many are carrying signs; some have American flags. Others are bringing children, and a few have dogs. There is a tremendous feeling of excitement and hope that Stewart and Colbert will provide some sort of forum that will address a real yearning many of these people have to be heard by the political establishment.

"I've lost faith in the system, basically," says a man in his thirties who has come from California for the event. "Whether the Republicans are in charge or the Democrats are in charge, it seems like government has reached the point of stalemate. When one group takes over the other one says we are not going to do anything to help you. Even if their constituents see an avenue for them to be helpful in some fashion, they will say 'No, we are more interested in taking power away from the other party rather than (helping)...' And in the meantime the rest of the country is languishing, so when this came up it struck a cord."

A man in his twenties from Florida says he doesn't like how polarized the national dialog has become. He says he came to hear "people talking normally without

hype and propaganda - - just being sensible.” He said he believes that if that happens, whether it is today or in the coming weeks on news and public affairs programming, he will hear his views reflected.

A woman from Connecticut, who was in D.C. for a conference, decided to come to the rally because she had heard a lot about it. “It just struck me that so close to the election the public needs to see the other side of this... I think it’s a brilliant idea, and it gets the point across better than anything else... It goes beyond the parties and says to people ‘Let’s get real here with what is going on.’ And I hope the message is heard by even Tea Party folks, and we can sit down and have a cup of coffee finally.”

11:45 a.m. Local transportation is congested to the point of standstill, according to posts on Twitter and on the rally’s Facebook page. A man from Connecticut tells the *New York Times* the Metro subway system is “unbelievably overcrowded... It looks like rush hour in the city.” He drove from Connecticut to a hotel in Rockville, Md., on Friday, and he said the hotel was “overbooked.” If the guests were “mostly people in their 40s and 50s, and all but a few were headed into D.C. today,” he said. “I think the age demographic has been overlooked in media reports so far.”³⁰⁴

Noon. The rally opens with the Roots, the house band for *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*. They begin with "Hard Times." Soul singer John Legend joins them for a performance of “Dear God 2.0” with lyrics such as “Is everything made in China?/ technology turning the planet into Zombies/ terrorists, crime sprees, assaults and robberies.” C-SPAN and Comedy Central carry the opening act. Fox News airs a report

³⁰⁴ Itzkoff.

on explosive packages coming into the country via UPS. Despite having a crew on the scene, MSNBC anchors talk to a reporter about the bankruptcy rate in Nevada. CNN airs a report from a rally in Charleston, W.Va., where Sarah Palin is expected to arrive momentarily.

12:07 p.m. There's at least one Republican at the event. A 65-year-old man wearing a black sweatshirt that reads "Life-Long registered Republican for sanity" came with his wife, a Democrat.³⁰⁵ He tells the *New York Times* there likely are other Republicans, but "most of them are keeping their heads down." The couple likes Stewart and watches him regularly. "We get our news from him," the man says. "What's important about Jon Stewart is that he reminds us of what our politicians have been saying in previous weeks and months." He says he came "to express support for voters and leaders who are socially tolerant and fiscally responsible, who can express their disagreement in a respectful and quiet way."

She says they are struck by the diversity of age in the crowd. "We thought this is the general population here."

12:10 p.m. Thousands of people continue to stream onto the National Mall. Behind the stage, three large unbroken lines at Third and Madison avenues give further evidence of delays on mass transit. One person carries a seven-foot paper mache dove with flapping wings. MSNBC cuts to Russert, who reports again that the National Mall is packed and lots of people are holding signs that question politics and the mainstream media. He also gives a subtle NBC plug, noting that the Roots are the band from

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

Fallon's show. Reporters seem obsessed with the crowd count and frustrated they don't have numbers to compare with Beck's rally so they can declare some sort of winner. Colbert has his own number and posts it to Twitter: "Early estimate of crowd size at Rally: 6 billion."

12:20 p.m. The band is playing "Little Ghetto Boy," and Black Thought announces they will offer a tribute to soul singer-songwriter Donny Hathaway. A sign in the crowd with a likeness of GOP Senate candidate Christine O'Donnell paraphrases Cat Stevens: "If you want to be me, be me, and if you want to be you, be you – and if you want to be a witch, that's O.K., too."³⁰⁶ CNN is interviewing Kerry Washington about her new movie, "Colored Girls." MSNBC is updating news about Tropical Storm Shary. Comedy Central has decided to air the rally without ads. A banner at the bottom of the screen announces that Reese's candy manufacturer is "a proud sponsor." An earlier strip listed VW also as "a proud sponsor."

12:35. p.m. Roots has been playing for a half hour. Journalists covering the event are starting to show some hostility with sarcastic comments on air and on Twitter. James Poniewozik of *Time* tweets: "This is the best Jimmy Fallon show I've ever seen." Greg Mitchell of *The Nation* tweets: "Well, one thing I've learned so far: the difference between a tuba and a sousaphone."

12:40 p.m. The warm-up acts continue with Adam Savage and Jamie Hyneman from Discovery Channel's "Mythbusters." They ask rally goers if they want to be the world's largest sample size for a planned experiment. They want to test how long it

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

takes for a “wave” to travel from the front of the crowd to the back. First, they ask everyone to participate; then only women; then only men. It is fastest when only men participate. They also ask the crowd to make noises listed on the JumboTron: Laugh politely, like at a cocktail party/ cheek pop/ silent/ laugh like a mad scientist/ cry. MSNBC continues to focus in a vague way on the size of the crowd, which reporters refer to as “tens of thousands of people.” Anchors promise to have more from the rally at the top of the hour, when Stewart and Colbert take the stage. CNN has hired comedian/correspondent Pete Dominick, a former Stewart/Colbert warm-up comedian, who also weighs in on the size of the crowd. Fox News cuts to its correspondent on the National Mall, who talks about all the humorous signs she has seen. She also reminds viewers that Stewart memorably called Obama “dude” while interviewing him Thursday on *The Daily Show*, which was taped in Washington.

12:50. p.m. Buses provided by the *Huffington Post* to transport rally-goers from New York to Washington are running late, according to the *New York Times*. Huffington who boarded one of the final busses in NYC was riding with the group, and her bus has not yet arrived. “The buses have been arriving in a stream for sometime and at least 100 have definitely arrived, but some of the later buses are still en route,” said a *Huffington Post* spokesman.

12:55 p.m. Savage of Mythbusters estimates that about 150,000 people are in the crowd, and that translates to roughly 20 million pounds of meat. He wants to see what happens if everyone jumps at the same time. “We must be setting a world record

for something.” He says that seismologists are on hand to record the results and reports that it was 14 trillion times smaller than the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

1 p.m. Stewart finally appears dressed in a sports coat, slacks and no tie. He introduces 4Troops, a vocal group made up of four veterans who sing *The Star-Spangled Banner*. Afterward, one of them shouts, "This is what it's all about!" Stewart plays to the ongoing concern journalists have shown about the crowd.

"We have over 10 million people. It is a perfect demographic sampling of the American people because we know if you have too many white people at a rally, then your cause is racist but if you have too many people of color at a rally, well then you must be just asking for something -- like eating in a restaurant." Daily Show correspondents Samantha Bee and Aasif Mandvi are in the crowd, he says, for additional data collection. They ask people to identify themselves by demographic: 1. Half-Mexican, half-white; 2. White female; 3. Jill: Asian-American from Taiwan; or 4. American, single. (You know I'm a 47-year-old married man, Stewart replies.)

1:05 p.m. Colbert's voice can be heard off stage. A shirtless Colbert appears on the JumboTron broadcasting from his "fear bunker," which he says is 2,000 feet below the stage and very, very dark. "Are you sure there are people at our rally?" he asks. "Are the men handsome? Are the women beautiful? And do they respond to obvious pandering?" Colbert comes up through the stage floor and joins Stewart. It's a riff on the Chilean miners. He's dressed like Evel Knievel and waving a Chilean flag. He pretends to release bees to send the crowd into a panic. "Kneel before Zod (a reference to the evil general in *Superman II*)," he commands. He tells rally goers: "If you're here

to restore sanity, say, "I'm concerned with the direction of the country, but am open to hearing a variety of ideas. 1, 2, 3! If you're here to keep fear alive, let me hear you say, "Whooooo!"

1:10 p.m The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority is reporting delays on all five lines of the Metro rail system, and Twitter is deluged with reports of overcrowded stations due to the rally. A couple that started out at the Bethesda station on the Red Line says it took them forty minutes to get a ticket because the lines were so long.³⁰⁷ They initially rode the Metro two stops in the direction away from Washington because the trains at the Bethesda station were jam-packed. "I've never seen it this bad," the man says. "But everyone was in a good mood!" A 21-year-old woman says the line for Metro fare cards stretched outside the Shady Grove station in suburban Washington. "It's the most people I've ever seen on the Metro, and I've been to two inaugurations," including President Obama's inauguration last year, she said.³⁰⁸

1:15 p.m. Colbert asks people who came to restore sanity to whisper a response, and those who came to "keep fear alive" to make ghost-like noises. Based on volume, he declares victory and says the rally is over. Colbert then asks for the rally to begin with a book burning, but Stewart prefers a more traditional benediction delivered by Father Guido Sarducci: "Dear God, all of us down here on the Mall hope you can see us. We're having a wonderful time... We want to thank you for getting all of us here safely and for making it possible to find parking spaces." Sarducci asks God to provide

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

a sign of which religion is the correct one. "Methodist?" "Episcopalian?" "Baptist?"

"Roman Catholic?"

1:20. Colbert has changed into an aviator's jacket and polka-dot pants. He introduces a poem he wrote and asks Sam Waterston, "the most reasonable-seeming man in America," to read it. Waterston begins: "Did you hear that? No? You're probably going deaf. It's your kids back home, cooking some crystal meth. Look around at these people, how safe do you feel? Your car when you parked, did you lock it? That guy who just coughed on your neck, did he have an infection? That restaurant where you went for brunch, did it fail its health inspection?" Waterston ends with a limerick about a man from Eau Claire who was killed by a bear.

1:25 p.m. Stewart introduces Yusuf Islam, formerly Cat Stevens. Islam begins to sing "Peace Train," but Colbert interrupts: "Yusuf -- Joe if I may -- I respect you. I love you, but I am not getting on that train. I'm not getting on some international peace train that probably needs a Europass to get on it. I have a better train, and the conductor has an important announcement to make." Ozzie Osbourne appears as Colbert's conductor and sings "Crazy Train." Stewart counters: "I'm not comfortable on that train. He says it is going off the rails." Islam and Osbourne finish. They embrace and leave. "We're here and we got all these people and we got no train," says Stewart. The 1970s soul song "Love Train" begins to play in the background. "What's that?" Stewart asks. Colbert says he's not going to get on any "love train." Stewart quips: "STDs?" Colbert responds: "STDs, heartbreak; that is scary. I'll get on the Love Train!" The O'Jays come out and sing "Love Train."

1:35 p.m. John Podhoretz of *Commentary* magazine tweets: “This is like the reverse of Woodstock: This is so painful everyone there is going to say they were somewhere else.”

1:40 p.m. Stewart finally gets to the serious part of the rally – where he shows his ideas of unreasonable and reasonable. "Obviously sanity does not mean never having an unreasonable moment," he says. He shows examples of what unreasonable behavior with a set of clips he calls “Moments of Unreasonableness.” They include Steven Slater, the JetBlue flight attendant, who says, "I could have written a book on ... etiquette. Next time I will try working things through." And Teresa Giudice of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, who is shown in her clip say, "There was no need to shout ... and overturn a table ... and it is not my place to judge."

1:45 p.m. Next come the Medals of Reasonableness, Stewart's to "individuals who demonstrated rationality." The first one goes to Armando Galarraga, a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers who threw a perfect game but an umpire blew a call that robbed him of the honor. Stewart noted that the day after the incident Galarraga returned to the field and publicly shook the umpire's hand. Galarraga accepts his medal in a videotaped segment.

1:50 p.m. Colbert interrupts the ceremony and announces the Stephen Colbert Fear Award (The Fear-Y), a statue of a naked man running with scissors. It's inscribed with a Latin message that when translated reads: “Warning: may contain Cadmium.” The winners are: ABC, CBS, the Associated Press, the *New York Times* and NPR for not letting their employees attend the rally. "Since they wouldn't allow any employees

to attend,” Colbert says, “we were forced to (give the award) to someone with more courage: a 7-year-old girl. Come on out, darling.” A girl comes onto the stage. “Are you scared to be here?” Colbert asks. “No, this is fun!” she says.

1:55 p.m Stewart introduces Velma Hart, the second winner of his Medal of Reasonableness. Hart made national headlines - and videos of her went viral on YouTube - after she told Obama in a very direct but respectful way during a CNBC town hall meeting on the economy that she was “exhausted from defending” him and impatient for the changes he promised. “Were you nervous?” Stewart asks. “Petrified,” she replies. Colbert gives his next “Fear-y” to Anderson Cooper’s black T-shirt. Colbert says that when Cooper shows up in a neighborhood wearing it, the appropriate response is “an irresistible urge to stock-up on water, duct tape, toilet paper and ammunition.” A crew member brings a black T-shirt on stage. “It is an honor to meet you,” Colbert says, shaking hands with the sleeve.

1:58 p.m. Stewart and Colbert are wearing competing flashy stars-and-stripes pullovers. Colbert tells Stewart, “You can’t wear that!” Stewart responds, “Everybody has the right to be patriotic.”

Colbert offers a song: “America’s perfect and there’s nothing to fix / My PIN code is 1776.” Stewart replies: “You can tax all my cash to help out a stranger / but I’ll sue city hall if they put up a manger...” Stewart: “I’ll defend anything any person says.” Colbert: “Unless it’s Juan Williams or Rick Sanchez.” They agree that America is “the greatest, strongest country in the world” and that “there’s no one more American than

we.” After they finish, Stewart tells the audience: “I am very sorry that you had to hear me sing. It worked in rehearsal.” The crowd starts chanting "U-S-A."

CNN correspondent Kate Bolduan reports this is one of the hardest rallies she's ever had to cover. "At any moment, you don't know what's going on...but I think that's the point." She adds that she has not seen any politicians in the crowd.

2:05 p.m. Stewart gives the next Medal of Reasonableness to wrestler Mick Foley for his charity work with children.³⁰⁹ "This historic day, this incredible medal around my neck, I have my eyes and one remaining ear open, watching and listening, and if I see or hear anybody acting in an unreasonable manner I will not hesitate, like a righteous bolt of thunder, to ask you to be polite to each other. Civility is cool!" he shouts. Colbert's gives his final Fear-y to Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg. Colbert says he is largely responsible for the fact that people no longer say "you're crazy" when you think someone is tracking your every move. They just say, "Oh, you're on Facebook." Colbert says that Zuckerberg values his own privacy more than he values the privacy of Facebook members. He accepts the medal on Zuckerberg's behalf and says he will post a picture of himself wearing it on his Facebook wall. "Mark: Friend me," Colbert jokes.

³⁰⁹ Foley is involved with the Make-a-Wish Foundation and makes surprise visits to children in hospitals. He also visits schools and libraries and talks to students about the value of education and importance of reading. He visited Washington, D.C., based military hospitals on almost a monthly basis for several years, and a *Washington Time's* article called him a "legend among hurt troops." He sponsors seven children with ChildFund International (formerly Christian Children's Fund), a group he has been affiliated with since 1992. In recent years, he has become one of the fund's leading donors, helping fund childhood education centers in the remote areas of the Philippines and Mexico along with four small community schools in Sierra Leone.

Stewart doesn't want the segment to end on "fear," so he gives another Medal of Reasonableness. This one goes to Jacob Isom, a skateboarder from Amarillo, Texas, who grabbed a Quran doused in kerosene from an evangelist who was talking about burning it at a September event.³¹⁰ Isom is there to receive it from Stewart, but Colbert grabs it. Stewart takes it back and hands it to Isom, who spontaneously throws it out into the audience and shouts "Thank you!"

2:10 p.m. Kid Rock and Sheryl Crow perform a new ballad for moderation and cooperation. It features the lyrics: "I can't change the world or make things better / The least that I can do is care." Alex Pareene of Salon.com tweets: "I mean I guess they're right that caring is, literally, the least that they could do."

WPRB D.J. Jon Solomon tweets: "There are things Sheryl Crow has turned down during her career, right?"

2:15. p.m. Colbert returns to the stage in a business suit and introduces Stewart, who also is wearing a suit, as the "keynote speaker." Stewart starts to talk about reason, but Colbert interrupts. He challenges Stewart to a debate and demands to be "empodiumed." Stewart quotes FDR, who said "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Colbert agrees but adds that that Roosevelt was dead 12 years later. "Was it murder?" he asks. "We'll never know. It's a cold case."

The debate strays to the subject of "Corbomite." Stewart says it is a possibly poisonous material that could be found in anyone's drinking water – but is in fact a

³¹⁰ <http://news.nationalpost.com/2010/09/14/texas-skateboarder-jacob-isom-stops-man-from-burning-koran-in-amarillo/>

reference to a classic episode of Star Trek. “You just got scared by something that is not real,” he points out. The conversation drifts into similar behavior about people of different religions. To show that there are “good” Muslims, Stewart brings out Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Then, to show that not all robots are scary, R2-D2 rolls on stage and makes some bleeping noises. Colbert says, “Your message of tolerance just drove the lane of my heart.”

2:35 p.m. Stewart and Colbert turns to a discussion about whether Americans are fundamentally divided at this point in our history. It’s a common theme on cable news shows that are the target of their. It’s also a second pivotal moment in the rally. Colbert says, “Jon, the American people cannot work together on anything. They can’t stand each other.” Stewart replies, “No, that is not true.” And that sets-up the single most effective moment: a two-minute montage Colbert has prepared that shows the well-known cast of cable news hosts and guests shouting hyperbole and questioning the legitimacy and the patriotism of Americans who disagree with their points of view.

The clip opens, notably, with Beck saying “progressivism is a cancer.” James Carville follows with “The Republican Party has gone completely brain dead.” Bill O’Reilly tells viewers “The Far Left does not want the USA to defeat terrorism.” A few seconds later, Keith Olbermann declares: “In Scott Brown, we have an irresponsible, homophobic, racist, reactionary, ex nude-model...” It continues for another sixty seconds with a long cast that includes Ann Coulter saying, “You can’t be a liberal and be a Christian,” and ex-*Saturday Night Live* comedian Victoria Jackson telling us “our government is all evil right now.”

Eventually, it builds to a crescendo set-up by Beck, who reappears and asks, "You know what our real problem is?" The answer comes in a montage of one- or two-second clips featuring a dozen or so familiar faces, such as Sarah Palin, Chris Matthews and Wolf Blitzer, O'Reilly, Olbermann, seeming to answer with: "a country full of Joe the plumbers," "crazed tea baggers," "far-right cranks," "far-left loons," "right-wing nut jobs," "practicing homosexuals," "the lame-stream media," "radical imams," "un-American bastards," "Harvard elites," "gun nuts," "tree huggers," "Yahoos and birthers," and "Fabian socialists." It all ends with MSNBC commentator Ed Schultz staring into the camera and screaming: "They are what's wrong with America!"

2:38 p.m. Colbert tells Stewart there is nothing he can do to defeat the video. There's a pause and John Oliver of *The Daily Show* appears dressed as Peter Pan. Oliver says, "Maybe the boys and girls out there can help him. Everyone there! Jon Stewart needs your help! Clap for him! Clap for him! Clap for him!" Stewart responds, "You're very kind, but I'm not dead." Stewart brandishes a remote control and simply turns off the JumboTron. "I'm melting!" Colbert cries. Channeling the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*, he falls to the ground and Oliver drags him offstage.

2:45. p.m. Stewart gets serious for his closing speech. In what amounts to a pre-emptive strike (as if by premonition he knows attacks are coming), he goes on record stating what he hopes he's accomplished. "I know there are boundaries for a comedian pundit talker guy, and I'm sure I'll find out tomorrow how I have violated them... So, what exactly was this? I can't control what people think this was. I can only tell you my intentions. This was not a rally to ridicule people of faith, or people of activism, or to

look down our noses at the heartland, or passionate argument, or to suggest that times are not difficult and that we have nothing to fear. They are and we do.”

Stewart takes dead aim at the cable news industry shown in Colbert’s montage. He accuses them of accelerating public fear and unrest instead of giving the public information and ideas to help combat it. For example, he says, words such as “racist” and “bigot” are tossed around so cavalierly on cable news that it insults the victims of bigotry and racism as well as the people who are inappropriately tarred with those terms. "There are terrorists and racists and Stalinists and theocrats, but those are titles that must be earned. You must have the resume. Not being able to distinguish between a real bigot and ... Rick Sanchez is an insult not only to (Sanchez) but to racists who have put in the exhausting effort it takes to hate." He continues: “The press is our immune system. If it overreacts to everything, we actually get sicker.”

Stewart also criticized cable news programs for basing their reporting in a frame that America is fragile and on the brink of catastrophe, because citizens can’t work together. “The truth is,” he says, “we do.” As an example, he cites daily traffic at the Lincoln Tunnel “(It’s) You go; then I’ll go. Sure, at some point there will be a selfish jerk who zips up the shoulder and cuts in at the last minute. But that individual is rare and he is scorned, and he is not hired as an analyst.”

2:59 p.m Stewart closes by telling rally goers he appreciates their support: "You want to know why I am here -- what I want from you? You have already given it to me. Your presence was what I wanted. Sanity will always be...in the eyes of the beholder. To see you here today and the kind of people you are, has restored mine. Thank you."

3:05 p.m. Stewart introduces Tony Bennett with a joke about medical malpractice and Bennett's trademark song, "I Left My Heart in San Francisco." Bennett sings "America the Beautiful" a cappella. The crowd chants "U-S-A." Stewart brings his celebrity guests back onstage, and Staples sings "I Know a Place." After that, the others - the Roots, Legend, Islam, Crow, Rock and R2-D2 – join her and sing "I'll Take You There." The rally concludes.

3:20 p.m. Fences collapse as thousands leave the mall in a surge through prickly bushes and over fences near the National Gallery of Art where the post rally exodus morphs into a parade.³¹¹ Thousands stream up Pennsylvania Avenue between 3rd and 11th Streets, which were blocked to traffic. Many continued to hold up signs, and some snapped final photos of the mall and the Capitol backdrop.

* * *

So, what was *The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear*? Was it simply *The Daily Show* brought to the National Mall; and if not, what was it?

The rally clearly was more than Stewart's regular show on Comedy Central (detailed in Chapter 3) or even an extended version of it. The physical aspects alone - locale, audience size and demographic, and the length of production – made it a grander and more elaborate event than Stewart's nightly productions.

The spirit of the National Mall, with the Capitol, Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial and its cluster of historical buildings and public museums, set a patriotic overtone that doesn't exist in Stewart's Manhattan studio. The crowd of

³¹¹ Ibid.

roughly a quarter million people was about 1,000 times the size of his regular studio audience. And it was fluid. People could come and go. They were free to pay attention or not to pay attention – a key difference from the highly controlled studio audience that is ushered into *Daily Show* tapings *en mass*, seated facing Stewart and not allowed to leave their seats until the taping is complete. The audience at the Mall was also more diverse in its national and regional make-up than audiences from the tri-state area that typically dominate tapings in the Manhattan studio. Finally, the event lasted roughly three times longer than a studio taping. It was far more costly. It required more material, more actors and guests, and grander multimedia production and special effects. In terms of cost-effectiveness alone, much more was at stake.

The nature of the Mall as a free and open public space also allowed people to bring children, pets and all sorts of camping and outdoor gear. Some brought signs, and political props and wore costumes that would not have been permitted in the Manhattan studio. That difference created a political aesthetic outside of Stewart's control that veered between liberal, libertarian and outright farce. It also contributed to side conversations about the nature of patriotism, the nature of our national identity and how we discuss those issues with each other. The enormous size of the crowd kept many attendees so far away from the stage that they actually watched the happenings on JumboTron screens set-up to accommodate them. There also was a tendency for audience members to engage in disruptive behavior that was more common the farther away from the stage one was located. The result was a less-intimate experience for the audience in terms of seeing Stewart (and Colbert) firsthand.

The rally also was covered by national and international media as a legitimate news event. Brief segments or special newsworthy moments of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* often turn-up on web sites such as *The Huffington Post* the following day. They also are replayed randomly on cable news shows or offered in “week in review” segments of Sunday public affairs programs. Stewart and Colbert have accepted the fact that they are considered potential newsmakers, but their nightly shows are not covered by news organizations as news events. That dynamic clearly affected the content of the rally. Stewart made an official announcement about it and a publicity apparatus swung into place on the Comedy Central and *The Daily Show* web sites. News organizations such as the *Washington Post* also touted their plans to cover it as a news event. Stewart even acknowledged that dynamic in his closing remarks when he said, “I know there are boundaries for a comedian/pundit/ talker guy, and I’m sure I’ll found out tomorrow how I have violated them.” In fact, Stewart and Colbert were so aware of the news coverage they held a press availability immediately afterward at the National Press Club.

Those are just the logistical and external differences. They are important because they shaped the way the audience experienced the event. It was loud and unruly with a feel similar to a rock concert. Those close to the stage had a more direct connection to the actual show and the performers than those far away. But there also were key differences between the rally and regular segments of *The Daily Show* in style, tone and content.

In terms of style, Stewart was more ringmaster than news anchor. He moved about on stage like an impresario introducing celebrities and other guests to the crowd, making sure those who were paying attention knew what was going on, and shuffling acts on and off stage. In fact, the most obvious difference between the rally and *The Daily Show* was that the rally was not a satirical newscast. The semiotics that frame *The Daily Show* were missing. Stewart wasn't dressed as a news anchor, and he wasn't seated behind a news desk. The rally's message was delivered through "acts," not satirical news reports or newsmaker interviews. The material was prepared well in advance and wasn't shaped by the traditional news value of timeliness within the daily news cycle. The writers didn't depend on events of that particular day for content.

In terms of tone, Stewart was sometimes funny and sometimes serious. He also framed the rally with a deliberate dose of sincerity that he delivered at timely moments. Some of that sincerity came between jokes and skits as the rally progressed, but the most pronounced moment of sincerity came at the end of the event when Stewart spoke directly to his audience about its purpose. The rally was designed to make a large overriding point about the role and impact of American media that Stewart doesn't make directly on his nightly shows. Skits and segments at the rally had a higher degree of purpose and meaning that was tied to the stated point of the event. Unfortunately, the pace and delivery at times were awkward and uneven. It's a downfall of a live event as opposed to one that is taped, edited and broadcast later. Satire requires a cognitive buy-in from the audience. It doesn't work if the audience isn't paying attention, and the

disjointed pace was itself a distraction that gave the feeling that the event may be lasting too long.

In terms of content, Stewart (and Colbert) delivered what they have offered on their shows for years: an ad hoc mix of comedy with serious overtones. The content included monologues and skits punctuated by musical interludes, which are not a part of a typical studio show. Stewart promised the event would not be politically partisan, and he kept his word. His audience at the rally was largely left-of-center, evidenced by t-shirts, signage, and its reactions to jokes and clips with conservative characters vis a vis its reaction to jokes and media clips with liberal characters. And that mirrors his wider audience. But the rally's narrative wasn't about the upcoming national election. It was not about Republicans and Democrats. It stuck to criticism of the national media that transcended one political party or one election. For example, the long-running thread through the whole event was a sincere series of "medals for reasonableness," which Stewart gave to people who showed "rationality and sanity in the face of difficult circumstances." One, for example went to Armando Galarraga, a major league baseball player who lost a perfect game to a widely publicized umpire error. Another went to a young man who actually stepped in to stop an evangelist from burning a Qur'an.

None of this should have been surprising. Stewart never pitched the event as a modified version or extension of *The Daily Show*. Its stated purpose was to provide a chance for what he said are the seventy-to-eighty percent of Americans who try to solve the country's problems rationally to be heard above what he describes as the more vocal and extreme fifteen-to-twenty percent of Americans who "control the conversation" of

American politics.³¹² It was Stewart's best opportunity to date – with the live audience and the news media coverage – to push the message that has been at the heart of his work at least since his 2004 *Crossfire* appearance.

However, a few days before the event, Stewart tripped-up when he got flippant and specific in an attempt to explain what was coming. His description veered away from the idea of the reasonable majority and onto the unreasonable minority, and the phrasing he used allowed many to interpret Stewart as laying a moral equivalency on actions and narratives offered by the political left and by the political right.

You may know them. They're the people who believe that Obama is a secret Muslim planning a socialist takeover of America so he can force his radical black-liberation Christianity down our throats. Or that George W. Bush let 9/11 happen in order to pass Dick Cheney's Halliburton stock portfolio.³¹³

That statement, coupled with the highly effective montage of caustic cable show hosts with guests from the political left and the political right, opened a floodgate. Many of those Stewart had charged that he was guilty of the same shorthand he was railing against. And to some degree, they were correct.

The Aftermath

For Stewart, 2010 ended on an amazing high: A *New York Times* headline compared him directly to Edward R. Murrow for his crusade on behalf of federal funding that would provide catastrophic health care for people who are ill from toxins they encountered from helping people at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. He

³¹² AFP, "US comics unveil dueling DC political rallies," 17 Sept. 2010.

³¹³ AFP.

dedicated his final show of 2010 to the cause, and the message he sent during that broadcast mirrored the two-tier message from the rally. Stewart criticized partisan congressional pettiness, accusing Republicans of belonging to “the party that turned 9/11 into a catchphrase.” More significant, he criticized the news divisions of the four broadcast networks for not reporting on the bill for more than two months. “Though to be fair,” he said in his classic comedic style, “it’s not every day the Beatles songs come to iTunes.”

Brian Williams, anchor of *NBC Nightly News*, declined to comment for that story when the *Times* asked about his network’s news judgment or how it covered the bill. He did, however offer a perspective on Stewart’s professionalism and popularity that increasingly is heard from journalists and news organizations that find themselves a target of Stewart’s work.

Jon gets to decide the rules governing his own activism and the causes he supports, and how often he does it – and his audience gets to decide if they like the serious Jon as much as they do the satirical Jon.³¹⁴

It’s a succinct capsulation of a key criticism Stewart has faced since his 2004 *Crossfire* appearance. In short, “Does he try and have it both ways?” (A veiled way to restate the simplistic question: Is he a journalist or a comedian? And to imply he must be one or the other and declare which professional code he is obliged to follow.) It’s how many corporate journalists try to discredit him - or at least cry foul these days when they feel bound by the professional ethos of detached objectivity, while they

³¹⁴ Bill Carter and Brian Stelter, “In Daily Show Role on 9/11 Bill, Echoes of Murrow,” *New York Times*, 26 Dec. 2010.

watch key parts of their audience turn away from the product they are producing in favor of information gathered without that ethos.

But it isn't the only frame Stewart's critics use, as post-rally events showed. As mentioned earlier, the rally was a specific moment when Stewart's work hit critical mass and his cultural cachet rose to a new height. Yet, the size of that critical mass and specific moment also provided an amplified framework and a national audience for criticism that would hardly resonate if it were hurled merely at a random episode of his 30-minute TV show. When Stewart announced the rally, he explained:

We live in troubled times with real people facing very real problems. Problems that have real if imperfect solutions that I believe 70 to 80 percent of the population could agree to try and could ultimately live with. Unfortunately, the conversation and process is controlled by the other fifteen to twenty percent. You may know them as the people who believe that Obama is a secret Muslim planning a socialist takeover of America, so he can force his radical black liberation Christianity down our throats, or that George Bush let 9/11 happen to help pad Dick Cheney's Halliburton stock portfolio.³¹⁵

That statement coupled with the video montage of acerbic cable news commentary by vocal liberals and conservatives, left some of the cable hosts shown on the video and others on the political left concerned that Stewart was making the argument that there is some moral equivalency between liberal and conservative extremes.

Stewart and Colbert spoke at the National Press Club after the rally. They continued to claim it was not a political event and to insist that it was done mostly for entertainment. Stewart told reporters:

³¹⁵ Joe Scarborough, Morning Joe: Stewart Announces Rally to Restore Sanity. <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3036789/vp/39229495#39229495>>

We're not running for anything. We don't have a constituency. We do television shows for people that like them and we hope that they continue to like them so that Comedy Central can continue to sell beer to young people... We wanted to do a really good show for people that wanted it.³¹⁶

But neither Stewart's post-event comments nor the enthusiasm the crowds showed before, during and after the rally prevented the backlash Stewart seemed to sense was coming when he made his closing remarks. Notably, much of the more pointed critique came from the ideological left. It included Keith Olbermann, host of *Countdown with Keith Olbermann* on MSNBC, and Bill Maher, host of *Real Time with Bill Maher* on HBO. Olbermann used his Twitter feed to comment on the rally as it progressed. He generally approved of its entertainment value as well as the idea that at times cable news slides into caustic narratives. He even suspended his "Worst Person in the World" segment after the rally to show solidarity with Stewart's idea. He did, however, fire back at Stewart during his closing remarks.

Olbermann, who was prominently featured during the montage of bombastic cable personalities, was one who saw Stewart arguing that there is a moral equivalency between the political left and the political right. He challenged that viewpoint, tweeting, "It wasn't a big shark but Jon Stewart jumped one just now with the 'everybody on Thr (sic) cable is the same' naiveté."³¹⁷ Olbermann carried the criticism further during his show the following week, claiming there is a difference between MSNBC and Fox,

³¹⁶ Khan and Dolak.

³¹⁷ Andy Barr, "Keith Olbermann: Jon Stewart Jumped Shark," *Politico*, 1 Nov. 2010. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1110/44477.html>

because "sticking up for the powerless is not the moral equivalent of sticking up for the powerful."³¹⁸

Maher responded the following week with even tougher and more direct criticism. His primary criticism mirrored the disappointment of many on the left who had hoped the rally would be more directly political. "If you are going to have a rally in which hundreds of thousands of people show up, you might as well make it about something," Maher said. He also echoed Olbermann's view of the moral equivalency argument and challenged Stewart's characterization of Olbermann. "Keith Olbermann is right when he says he's not the equivalent of Glenn Beck," Maher explained. "One reports facts, and the other is very close to playing with his poop."

Maher's tougher criticism resurrected Stewart's announcement. Maher told his audience that the message of the rally as he heard it was that if the media would stop providing a platform to "the crazies on both sides" maybe we could restore sanity.

When Jon announced his rally, he said the national conversation was dominated by people on the right who believe Obama is a socialist and people on the left who believe 9/11 was an inside job. But I can't name any Democratic leaders who think 9/11 was an inside job. But Republican leaders who think Obama is a socialist? All of them. McCain, Boehner, Cantor, Palin. All of them. It's now official Republican dogma like tax cuts pay for themselves and gay men just haven't met the right woman.

The criticism apparently stung Stewart so much he agreed to a full hour interview with Rachel Maddow on her cable show the following week. It was out of professional

³¹⁸ Aliyah Shahid, "Keith Olbermann Drops 'Worst Persons in the World' segment on MSNBC after Jon Stewart rally," *The Daily News*, 2 Nov. 2010.

character, because Stewart gives relatively few interviews where he talks about his work and the muse behind it. The interview with Maddow was significant for several reasons. It took place on a stark set with minimal production and was recorded and edited into commercial-friendly segments for Maddow's show. More important, Stewart seemed relatively inarticulate and gave a milquetoast rebuttal to Olbermann, Maher and other critics. The conversation seemed more like two friends having an awkward disagreement about something highly identified with one of them but important to both. In the end, there was little news and no real closure.

The point Stewart tried to make with Maddow was that as Americans we – and the news media that serve us – should reconsider our news values. He argued that news organizations should move away from their emphasis on partisan conflict and embrace a more moral tradition. He also took the position that there is a demand for news topics and frames that embody our democratic spirit and that actually reinforce a sense of solidarity among Americans.

Maddow opened the interview by paraphrasing Maher's criticism. Stewart acknowledged being inarticulate in his rally announcement. He claimed, however, that Maher and others were missing "the seminal thrust" of what he was saying. He said the intention of the rally was not to point specifically to people on the left and to people on the right, and then pit the two against each other. The intention was to say that too many Americans have been convinced by national media – especially cable news – that the primary conflict in America is between liberals and conservatives, the people who live in red states and the people who live in blue ones.

All the news networks have bought into that...They have this idea that, you know, the fight in Washington is Republicans and Democrats. So, (the media have decided) why don't we isolate that? And we'll stand back here. And that, you know, Democrats and Republicans will go at it. Red and blue states will go at it. And what it does is it amplifies a division that I actually don't think is the right fight...What I do believe is both sides have their way of shutting down debate. And the news networks have allowed these two sides to become the fight in the country. I think the fight in the country is corruption vs. not corruption.³¹⁹

Stewart's explanation was consistent with his statements about the rally (before and after) as well as with his public statements on *Crossfire* and elsewhere. Yet, it's easy to see how his intent to resist being partisan by giving examples of both conservative and liberal extremes can be interpreted as taking the familiar "neutral path" or promoting the dubious epistemology that there is a reasonable middle that always is somehow closest to truth and that truth and reason emerge if "both sides" or "all extremes" are given equal amounts of time and space in a debate.

Stewart went to great lengths in the interview to reassert his familiar position that he is little more than a stand-up comedian. Maddow, however, argued that even though Stewart identifies his work as "fake news" that is "built with a fake news process," many who watch him and who watch cable news don't see much difference. "Even if you are not launching it the same way, it's being received in the same way," she said, "and the barriers between what actually happens on cable news and what you're satirizing and what you're doing – we're not seen as being all that different."

Stewart said that doesn't concern him, though he can see how it might bother people in the journalism industry. He said he feels more kinship to Jerry Seinfeld than

³¹⁹ The Rachel Maddow Show, transcripts.
http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/40194651/ns/msnbc_tv-rachel_maddow_show/

to Maddow, Olbermann or other cable hosts who identify themselves as journalists or with the network apparatus they embody. He rejected the notion that he has brought something new to political discourse or somehow has created a new type of journalism. He noted that the craft he employs has been part of western culture for centuries.

There has been a form of me around forever - - a comedian who with political and social concepts criticizes (those in power) from a haughty yet feckless perch throwing things... I really feel like I am on pretty solid ground with the footsteps of my ancestors.³²⁰

Here, Maddow showed the same concern that other journalists (Brian Williams as the earlier example) seem innately focused on. What is Jon Stewart's place in the dynamic of news and public information, and what rules and traditions are he obliged to observe? The interview ends shortly after a seminal exchange with no consensus between the two.

STEWART. The one thing that I don't have that you have is the ability to really do something about (the tone of cable news). You're in the game like -

MADDOW. You're in the game, too. We're in the same game.

STEWART. I don't think so. I think you're in a better game than I'm in.

MADDOW. How what's the difference? What's the material difference?

STEWART. You're on the playing field, and I'm in the stands yelling things.

MADDOW. Everybody sees you as on the playing field, too - - I think...

STEWART. But here's again back to the point of the rally. I could have gotten on the field, and people got mad that I didn't, but that was the point. The rally was to deflate a bubble, and to do what I think satire does best, which I articulate an intangible

³²⁰ Ibid

feeling that people are having, bring it into focus, say you're not alone. It's a real feeling. It's maybe even a positive feeling, a hopeful feeling. In a weird way, it's idealistic, but it's impotent. The next thing I can do is step onto the field and go, "So now, here's what we are going to do, people. Jones, you go over there. Brooklyn, you grab the canteens were going to have to --" but I don't. That's my failing and my indulgence but it's done because I feel like I'm where I belong. And I feel like I serve the best purpose in my life or in whatever it is that I can. But I don't take any satisfaction in that. And I don't take any satisfaction in just being a critic. Roger Ebert doesn't make movies. So to say, like, "Well, Roger, you're in the game." No, he's not. He's not making movies. He's sitting in the seat going, "This movie sucks." That's me.

CHAPTER 7

EPILOGUE

Notions of community and civic participation, and the role journalism plays in establishing, reinforcing or disrupting them, have been part of American life since the Colonial Era. Equally American, and closely connected with them, are the ideas that our public institutions and elected officials are appropriate targets for both journalistic scrutiny and comedic satire. Press and speech protections that James Madison and Alexander Hamilton wrote into the Constitution have served journalists and satirists – and those who work both camps, such as Ben Franklin, Mark Twain and Hunter S. Thompson – during critical times in our history. Indeed, the blurring of lines between news and entertainment, public policy and popular culture, is not a new phenomenon.

Yet, recent concerns that journalism is being subsumed within the larger field of mass communication and competing with an increasingly diverse group of narratives that includes political satire are well-founded. Changes in media technology and acute economic uncertainty have hit traditional news outlets at a time when Americans clearly want a voice they can trust to challenge institutions they believe are failing them. Reporters for mainstream media are caught between a public that ever demands they do a better job and a system that constantly pressures them in the direction of a worse one.

Joe Atkinson notes that the idea of a free market, which many Americans see as a capitalistic panacea, distorts our expectation of journalism. The market approach implies that the more deregulated the business environment - the more voices that enter it and the more competitive it is - the better the job the news industry will do for its audience. Unfortunately, there is widespread evidence of the opposite. Hyper-competition in news media often sets off an ersatz race for the bottom. Digital convergence, channel proliferation, and business plans that call for fragmentation of audiences have brought about a flight to entertainment and intensified pressures to attract audiences and to cut costs; pressures that often overwhelm any inclination to serve the general public.³²¹

A generation ago, broadcast executives tried to consolidate audiences into their network base. Today, their post-broadcast counterparts narrowcast to niche audiences with polarized partisan appeals.³²² As media consumers, we live in an age of abundance. We have more news and information available to us than ever. Yet, major news organizations are cutting staff, closing bureaus, and news about our political, and the news we get about politics has become increasingly “mediatised,” that is, bent to serve media purposes and thus more truncated, personalized, professionalized and cynical.³²³

Todd Gitlin argues that the result of this “media unlimited” is “an age of disposable feelings.”

³²¹ Joe Atkinson, “Politics as Comedy,” New Zealand Herald, 17 Aug. 2010.

³²² Joseph Turow, “Breaking up America: Advertisers and the New Media World,” Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

³²³ Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler, *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2009. 56-60.

Each hot, breaking, unsurpassed, amazing, overwhelming event fades, superseded by sequels; each ‘crime of the century’ dissolves into the next, only to be recycled in the form of TV collages, magazine and movie of the week ‘specials’, instant books, branded sound bites and video clips, chat groups and instant polls, each cross-referenced to previous spectacles, each assigned meanings by choruses of pundits and focus groups, each instantly labeled unique, unforgettable.³²⁴

It’s within this environment, not despite it or against it, that Stewart has emerged.

Karl Marx uses *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, his materialist conception of history, to state his classic view of the individual’s place in history, saying: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please...” A century later, Mills drew on those ideas to claim “Men are free to make history, but some men are much freer than others – that such freedom requires access to the means of decisions and of power by which history may be made.”³²⁵

Stewart is more cultural icon than historic figure. Yet, the research for this project shows a similar dynamic is driving his ascension. If Mills correctly moves Marx’s economic arguments forward by taking the position that “innumerable entrepreneurs and consumers by ten thousand decisions per minute shape and reshape our economy,” it seems reasonable that similar political and economic forces – and innumerable consumers in tens of thousands of simultaneous conversations – shape our

³²⁴ Gitlin.

³²⁵ C. Wright Mills *The Sociological Imagination* 40th anniversary edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 181.

political debate. And that Stewart is simultaneously one of those forces and at least in part a result of them.

Heroes, Fools and Villains

The bonding that occurs when a comedian's audience shares laughter can make the world a more manageable and less threatening place. In this way, a comedian serves two near-universal functions:

...he is permitted to say things about society that we want and need to have uttered publicly, but would be too dangerous and too volatile if done without the mediation of humor; and as a comic character, he can represent through caricature, those negative traits which we wish to hold up to ridicule, to feel superior to and to renounce through laughter.³²⁶

As previously shown, this pleasant, ritualistic type of communication is not a recent phenomenon. Nor is it unique to the Anglo-American tradition. It can be traced over centuries to cultures in Europe, Asia, Africa, Central and South America, where jesters, tricksters and fools have appeared in both primitive and technologically advanced societies.³²⁷

Scholars note that these comedic archetypes almost always show vulnerability – a marginalization, often self-proclaimed – that allows them to act idiosyncratically instead of behaving in a way that supports social cohesiveness. Doing so, gives the audience a vehicle it can use to relate to their humanity. So, in the end, the comedian

³²⁶ Lawrence Mintz, "The 'New Wave' of Standup Comedians: An Introduction," *American Humor: An Interdisciplinary Newsletter*, 4,2 (Fall 1977) 1-3.

³²⁷ Olson, 110.

offers a subversive appeal that meets the audiences need for a vicarious challenge to authority and/or the status quo.

Americans have a need to create social types, and Orrin Klapp scrutinizes three of them: heroes, villains and fools. His approach is primarily through language, not persons. He assumes that if something is important to people, they will find a name for it and talk about it.

At first blush, the tendency might be to consider Stewart (the comedian) as a “fool.” But in Klapp’s schema, a fool is a “shrunk creature of defect and weakness.” Stewart would be what Klapp considers a hero: a leader recognized for honored status, for whom celebration and veneration is appropriate.³²⁸ Klapp’s heroes are regarded with awe that verges on veneration.

Having in many ways the ritual place of an icon. Because of belief in their unusual merits, they are powerful leaders with charismatic authority, (they are) widely imitated and followed. They acquire a circle of devotees who sing their praises, keep parts of their person or property as relics.

Klapp says the purpose of hero-worship behavior seems to be to convert at selected individual into an idea a durable symbol or dominate the scene of human action, symbolizing success, perfection and conquest of evil, providing a model for identification by the group – one might say its better self.”³²⁹ Crisis, especially conflict, tends to produce heroes, and Klapp notes that persons continually in the public eye are in inherent danger of becoming fools or villains, if they do not rise to the stature of heroes - - especially in times of crisis.

³²⁸ Orrin Klapp, “Heroes, Villains and Fools as Agents of Social Control,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 19 No. 1 1954.

³²⁹ Klapp 57

These same times of moral crisis produce vilification movements. Klapp argues that this occurs spontaneously as people follow an urge to find and punish culprits. A vilifying movement seems to arise typically from a widespread feeling of moral alarm, resulting perhaps from flagrant crimes, a military threat or the failure of an institution.³³⁰ In such periods, there is a general mood of villain making; prosecutors work with greater zeal, judges feel it incumbent upon them to be severe and set examples and witnesses have more versatile memories. The need for culprits may be so great as to provoke outright scapegoating.

Writing before the feminist movement and when gender affected typecasting in a way we hope to have transcended, Klapp cites the strong man, the thinker, the lover (and on the female side, the “love queen” or sex symbol) as examples of social heroes.³³¹ Mass communication, he argues, has brought to the fore another variety, whose specialty is a shining impression – some remarkable thing they do before a crowd, camera or microphone. He cites Dale Carnegie and Will Rogers as prime examples.

The splendid performer may be a strong man who has little power aside from his popularity and effectiveness as a spokesman for politics made by someone else... (he) aims primary at impression rather than at beating or controlling others (though they may be conjoined); he is directed towards audiences; he is colorful and tried to set himself off (whereas the man of power or ability may be inconspicuous; his goal is to steal the show, not run it; basically he is a showman.³³²

³³⁰ Klapp 60.

³³¹ Klapp, 27-35.

³³² Klapp 35.

Rogers was a rough-hewn, part-Indian, cowboy from Oklahoma, who was confident enough to embrace his own culture and character and to use it in his populist rhetoric aimed at large financial institutions and elite politicians. His success in large part depended on people liking him. He was a paradoxical and unique figure, who Klapp writes, “rolled Dale Carnegie and George Bernard Shaw into one.” Franklin Roosevelt, another “hero” of the Depression era, was in many ways his opposite: urbane and privileged. Yet, like Rogers, Roosevelt realized his success depended on people liking him. The iconic photo of Roosevelt smiling broadly in the back seat of his car holding the cigarette holder demonstrated the confidence and likeability Americans needed to see to rally around a leader during in that era. To paraphrase Carnegie’s famous creed: “If you want people to like you, Rule 2 is: smile.”

A challenge with classifying heroes of the “shining impression” type is that they don’t all achieve that status in the same way. John Kennedy rose partly from his family and its social connections, while Ronald Reagan was a classic charmer. Both had innate charisma that transcended their political policies. Oprah Winfrey plays up the idea that she is a friend you can trust and talk to. International soccer star David Beckham and tennis great Kournikova are models of physical and athletic perfection we can aspire to or at least respect. Tiger Woods and OJ Simpson are former heroes whose actions caused them to lose the likeability requisite for the “hero of shining impression” status in the age of mass media.

Stewart (and Colbert) fit into this category with Rogers, Sahl, and others. Indeed comedians have to be likeable. Making people smile and laugh is their trade. It’s what

the audience expects, and they fail if they don't make that happen. However, they don't all achieve that the same way. Rogers, who was famous for "never meeting a man he didn't like," was very deferential to his audience in a way Stewart and Sahl aren't. Stewart's claim that he follows in the footsteps of centuries of satirists shouldn't be interpreted to say his own satire mirrors theirs in technique and tone. It doesn't. That is because language and cultural mores are fluid.

Satire, like journalism, is a form of communication, and Carey's work on communication as culture, which he applied to news as a cultural form, offers insight that can be applied to satire. He argues that communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed.³³³ These are key goals for successful satire. And his ritual and transmission models of communication show how human action and social behavior transfer information and knowledge – whether journalism or satire - over distance as well as reinforce cultural practices.

Carey identified news as a form of culture invented by a particular class as a particular point in history the middle-class largely in the eighteenth century. Like any invented cultural form, he argues, news both forms and reflects a particular "hunger for experience," and this hunger has a history grounded in the changing style and fortunes of the middle-class.³³⁴ As such, it does not represent a universal taste or necessarily legitimate form of knowledge but an invention in historical time that like most other human inventions will dissolve when the class that sponsors it and its possibility of having significance for us evaporates.

³³³ James Carey, *Communication as Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1989, 23.

³³⁴ Carey 21.

Ben Franklin's world was a new country grappling for identity and structure, and that was reflected by the tone he used for *Silence Dogood*. Twain came to prominence during the great westward expansion. Rogers' era was the Great Depression; Sahl's the Cold War and repression of the fifties and early sixties. What they have in common is that they prospered when America was at a social and political crossroads. The media they used and the tone of their work were successful because they captured a spirit of the times, not because it directly mirrored the techniques or tones of satirists before them.

The New News

Scholars who have written favorably about Stewart, Colbert and Maher argue their brand of satire and humor has broken new ground because it is genuinely self-reflexive, discursive and intellectually critical. In addition to exposing official propaganda and mainstream media complicity, they argue it “does a better job in engaging individual sin reasoned discussions that are important in upholding a democratic system” and provides “audiences with meaningful resources for citizenship and civic engagement.”³³⁵ Unfettered by notions of balance or objectivity, they are free to “play the role of speaking what goes unsaid in the main steam news or of highlighting the nonsense of what is said.”³³⁶ Finally, the comedic meme gives their performance “potentially influential by privileging the audiences power of view and making its members feel smart.”³³⁷

³³⁵ Jones and Baym, 2010, 279.

³³⁶ Boren and Tew, 309.

While those findings are significant, a larger question remains as to whether this parody/ satire is beneficial for democracy, especially the discourse underway in present-day America in particular. Baym notes that traditional news assumes an epistemological certainty, but satire is implicitly dialogical: A discourse of inquiry, a rhetoric of challenge that seeks through the asking of unanswered questions to clarify the underlying morality of a situation.³³⁸ And Jones argues that even if younger citizens were really relying on late night television comedians for news and information about politics, “the fate of the (U.S.) republic doesn’t seem in jeopardy if a comedy program like *The Daily Show* is a source for their knowledge of public affairs.”³³⁹

As Maddow, Williams and Olbermann showed in the week after the Rally to restore sanity, the dominant conversation coming from the journalism industry about Stewart concerns where Stewart fits into the world journalists inhabit. It was the frame Maddow returned to over and over in her interview. It also is the frame at the heart of the *New York Times* story that compared Stewart to Murrow, which epitomizes the hyperbole that often surrounds Stewart. No one with a proper sense of American history or of the scope of Murrow’s work - from London during the Blitz, his take-down of Joe McCarthy or his historic documentary *Harvest of Shame* - can argue credibly that Stewart’s advocacy for the 9/11 responders makes him a modern-day Murrow.

³³⁷ Ibid, 311.

³³⁸ Baym, 2005.

³³⁹ Jones, 2007, 146

It's the same supply-side approach that marks the dominant scholarship on Stewart, Colbert, Maher and others. Jones and Baym begin their work from a position that challenges the style, substance, content and claim to authority made by contemporary television news. Jones focuses largely on how Stewart and others have changed the public conversation with interviews that are critical but good-natured. He argues that Stewart's style translates into authenticity and that audiences see that narrative as more genuine, honest, and real in tone and style than what they typically see on television. Baym offers a more complex vision. He takes the position that television news over the last forty years has moved through three dominant paradigms: high modern, postmodern and neo-modern. His central claim is that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are necessary reactions to the decline of democratically useful news and public affairs programming. While Jones sees the work of these comedians as an effort to reinvent political talk on television, Baym places *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* into a paradigm he constructs for "the evolution of broadcast news."³⁴⁰

This approach, while informative, is narrow and limited on several fronts. First, Baym's evolutionary model of neo-modern broadcast news implies that Stewart and Colbert are offering something derivative yet largely new. It ignores a much larger context that can be drawn from the historical tradition of satire as a tool of political communication. That tradition dates to the Greeks and Romans. It rose to prominence during the Enlightenment with the Anglo-Irish tradition embodied by Jonathan Swift and others whose influence on American colonial writers such as Ben Franklin is well

³⁴⁰ Jones and Baym, 2010.

documented. Indeed, America has a rich tradition of satire, journalism and politics coming together in the public sphere demonstrated by Mark Twain, Will Rogers, Hunter S. Thompson and others. This paper argues that Stewart and Colbert fall more appropriately within that tradition.

Additionally, Jones and Baym's focus on television news shortchanges the existence, contribution and impact other media (newspapers, the internet, news magazines) have on political discourse. The idea that Stewart and Colbert have emerged because television news has failed, or that it has morphed into a disappointing source for political information ignores political, economic and technological developments that have affected the journalism industry well beyond television and clearly contributed to the rise of satire on late-night television. This paper shows that public discourse is shaped by larger systems and structures and currents that may not seem so immediately or directly tied to a specific discussion or personality, such as the repeal of the fairness doctrine, deregulation of cable television, creation of the internet, economic uncertainty around business models built on advertising, etc.

Finally, and most important, the present scholarship lacks extensive first-hand data from citizens who actually look to Stewart as a source of political information to explain what has caused them to turn away from traditional journalism or look for something to augment it. The question here, then, really isn't what Stewart wants. It is what his audience wants. Research presented earlier in this chapter came from extensive interviews with citizens who make up arguably Stewart's most loyal followers. In those

interviews, they described why they look to Stewart and what they want to see in the narrative of public affairs.

Final Thoughts

So what's the verdict on Stewart's audience? It's a demographic that is likely to be politically active. It's a demographic likely to vote, and likely to be engaged in what is called "the process."

Why then would a comedian make them feel more connected to the process than working in their districts for their congressional candidate? Are these people serious about politics? Or have they effectively checked out and simply want to have it both ways - - the way Stewart's critics sometimes charge about him.

Stewart likes to challenge the widely held belief that people turn to his show for information about public affairs. He takes the position that Americans are living in an "age of information osmosis" that makes it nearly impossible to get news from just one source. He says that his show wouldn't be a success if his audience didn't come with widespread knowledge of the characters, places and events he points to in monologues and skits.

Our show would not be valuable to people who didn't understand the news because it wouldn't make sense. We make assumptions about your level of knowledge that... if we were your only source of news, you would just watch our show and think, 'I don't know what's happening.'³⁴¹

Stewart is largely correct. As Gitlin notes, we are living in an age of "Media Unlimited." The proliferation of real-time delivery systems for news and information is

³⁴¹ Jon Stewart. (2002). *A Conversation with Jon Stewart*. [Video]. Harvard Institute of Politics: Harvard University.

unprecedented. Stewart also is correct that the irony, semiotics and double entendre that are widely used in successful satire require the listener to be familiar with the object being satirized.

But the peer-reviewed published studies can't be ignored. They have shown that *The Daily Show* comes close to providing a complete and regular overview of the top national news, that fans of *The Daily Show* are consistently more knowledgeable about general news, and that they have a more accurate idea of facts behind presidential elections than citizens who don't watch the program.

What is incorrect is that this is a fundamental conflict. The discussion – regularly framed in media reports by short and specious headlines – seems to imply that Stewart increasingly is *the* source (as in the sole source) of news and information for large numbers of people, which none of the studies shows. Less titillating but more accurate headlines might read something like: “Young people are tuning into Jon Stewart, who satirizes political events and people they hear discussed regularly among their friends and that they read about on Internet sites, blogs and Twitter and occasionally learn about in newspapers and see mentioned on television newscasts. Not surprisingly, they remember some of what they see.” It's not as Earth-shattering, but it's much more accurate.

A more interesting and complex discussion focuses on the recurring statement made during interviews at the rally: that Stewart's fans feel more connected to the process watching him on stage than they would working in their districts for their congressional candidate the week before a national election.

Are these people serious about politics? Or have they effectively checked out and simply want to “have it both ways” the way Stewart’s critics sometimes charge about him.

They haven’t checked out of the system as much as they are checking into a different conversation. They are thinking about politics in radically different ways – that isn’t to say with racially different philosophies. They are processing political information differently.

Americans are moving away from Michael Schudson’s informed citizen model, where authoritative news media give a receptive public the information it needs to participate in politics. Technology that has helped enhance the idea of a global village has reminded us what it is like to talk to each other. And that technology is allowing us to shift our political dialog from the mass society model Mills identified in the 1950s to the public society model espoused earlier by Dewey and more recently by Carey.

In Mills’ mass society model, media provide information and news designed to tell citizens what is happening in the world, but they don’t do it in a way that connects the audience together or connects the information on public issues with the challenges felt by individuals. The mass society model facilitates what Mills calls a “power elite,” and America is moving through a time when political scandals and economic crises have shaken confidence in political and corporate elites, including corporate media.

In Mills’ public model, citizen discussion is the chief form of communication and mass media, if they exist, magnify and animate that. Media link the discussions of

one primary public with the discussions of another. In the primary public, the competition of opinion goes on between people whose views serve reasoned interests.

Stewart is part of the shift away from the authoritative mass model toward the public model. Americans still get information from mass media – from the *New York Times*, the Associated Press, CBS, NBC, ABC and FOX, and the national news magazines (Time, Newsweek and US News). But they aren't stopping there. They have become media users themselves and they are talking about the information they get from traditional media on blogs, twitter, Facebook pages and other ways.

And Stewart is part of that secondary conversation.

Stewart is smart and independent. Participants at the *The Rally to Restore Sanity* used the word “smart” repeatedly to describe Stewart. They used it in conjunction with the idea that the information he provides is unique and independent. Stewart's audience makes an intellectual connection between independence, integrity and truth. They said they feel “numbed out” when news shows on the broadcast and cable networks present the same issues in a near cookie-cutter fashion. That repetition damages the veracity of the news in their minds. They said they recognize similar words and phrases being used by different hosts and guests, as if they are new and original thought - - and that leaves them feeling almost insulted or at least intellectually taken for granted. They want news that is original in its conception and point of view, not news that tends to sound the same like the news they heard the previous hour just from a different person.

Stewart isn't harsh. Participants at the rally tended to tie this aspect of Stewart's work to the idea of “restoring sanity.” Many of them said they are looking for news and

information that doesn't pit one group of Americans against another. A number of them offered the familiar phrase "both sides do it." However, they were referring to harshness in the tone and mechanics of the discussion, not necessarily the fact that news shows feature committed liberals and committed conservatives with strong opinions. These consumers were clear that they don't mind news that presents or parses strong opinions and ideology. In fact, most said they welcome it, that it can be engaging. They were not suggesting that news should cater to political moderates or implying that sanity lies somewhere in a center-right paradigm dominated by liberal republicans and conservative democrats. They said sanity lies in civil discourse, and many of them said that Stewart's show is one of the few places they find it.

Stewart affirms what they were thinking. Participants at the rally expressed a fundamental disappointment with the way broadcast networks and cable news shows approach journalism. They are looking for deliberative information that transcends conflict and summaries of polls and political process. They don't get original reporting from Stewart, but they do get empathy for their disappointment with the focus of broadcast and cable news. When Stewart parodies the news, he effectively tells them they weren't wrong to feel disappointed with it, because he sees the same things wrong with it that they do. Many said they came to the rally to be with others who shared that disappointment, and that when they tune into *The Daily Show* they also feel a connection with likeminded people – partly partisan, but also those simply disappointed in American journalism - that transcends the jokes of the evening.

Stewart speaks truth to power. Participants at the rally said they feel that our political process and the journalists who cover it have been co-opted by wealthy, elite interests. They also said that our political and journalistic institutions are powerful interests on their own. They believe that even though Stewart's ideas are liberal, his work is grounded more in an ideology of an outsider working on behalf of the powerless and poking at the powerful than in partisan political terms. They said network news often sanitizes its message and fails to take a stand against powerful interests out of a misplaced sense of fairness, and that cable news shows tend to be so partisan that their targets are predictable and limited. This is a real nexus for the other elements Stewart's audience mentioned. Not only does Stewart speak truth to power, but he does it in a clever and independent way. He does it without being harsh, and he does it in a way that connects with his audience and allows them to connect with each other. Speaking truth to power is a role Americans traditionally have associated with journalism, and even though Stewart insists he isn't a journalist and his work isn't journalism, this many account for many people believing his work falls into that vein.

Appendix 1

Number of Times a Presidential Character Appeared on SNL by Season

	G W B U S H	G O R E	C L I N T O N	P E R O T	D O L E	B U C H A N A N	G H W B U S H	D U K A K I S	R E A G A N	M O N D A L E	C A R T E R	F O R D	N I X O N	M c G O V E R N	K E N N E D Y	L I N C O L N	J A C K S O N	T O T A L
02	2																	2
01	8	2	1				1		1		1	1						15
00	1 4	1 1	8				3		1		1	1						39
99	4		4				1											9
98			1 5														1	16
97			7	1	1													9
96		2	1 4	3	1 2		2		2		2	2						39
95			4		1 0	2												16
94			2	1			2						1					6
93			4	1														5
92			9	4	1		3											17
91			2	1		1	4											8
90						1	6		1							1		9
89							7		2		2	1						12
88							4	3	1		1							9
87					1		4		2									7
86									3			1						4
86									4			1						5
84									2	3								5
83									4				1	1				6
82									2		1							3
81									5				1					6
80									4		3							7
79							1		1		1							3
78											3		2					5
77									1		3	1	1					6
76											9	3	3					15
75									1		1	6	1		1			10
Ttl	2	1	7	1	2	4	3	3	3	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	293

	8	5	0	1	5		8		7		8	7	0					
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Source: Content analysis by Joe Cutbirth from Saturday Night Live Transcripts.

<<http://snltranscripts.jt.org>>

- a) The year listed for each season is the year in which the season began. Seasons begin in September and typically run through the spring of the following year.

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